The Works of

George W. M. Reynolds

Mrs. Fitzherbert

The Mysteries of the Court of London

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CHAPTER I

THE MENDICANT FAMILY

UPWARDS of a week had now passed since Mrs. Melmoth and her children were thrust forth into the open streets to beg their bread.

In Whitehall had they first taken their stand, and for hours not a penny was disbursed to them by the passers-by, not a hand was stretched out to their relief.

If a carriage stopped near the place where the poor family had taken their stand, and if the elder boy ventured to creep toward the door, with shivering limbs, naked feet, and tears rolling down his sunken cheeks, the rough, stern voice of a flunkey, wearing the ostentatious garb of a vile servitude, sent him back again cowering to his mother's side; and the elegantly dressed ladies in the vehicle would remark amongst themselves " how disagreeable it was to have the streets so terribly infested with beggars."

And yet one poor sixpence from the purse of either of those magnificent dames would have been received with thankfulness, oh, such thankfulness.

The shades of evening were already beginning to gather upon the mighty Babylon, when a poor female servant, out of place and seeking a situation, took compassion upon the wretched family; and, having asked the mother a few questions, thrust a shilling into her hand. Mrs. Melmoth saw only one other shilling remaining in the tender-hearted

young woman's purse, and she was loath to receive such generous alms from a good creature who was herself standing on the threshold of want. But the servant-maid darted away with tears streaming from her eyes; and Mrs. Melmoth was enabled to procure a morsel of bread for her children and an asylum for the night.

But where was that night passed? In one of those filthy low lodging-houses which are supported by thieves, tramps, and mendicants, and to which poverty compels the honest to resort. Forced to herd with the vilest of the vile and the most degraded of all society's innumerable outcasts, Mrs. Melmoth gathered her children around her in a corner of the room which was filled to suffocation and the atmosphere of which was fetid enough to breathe a pestilence; and while the young ones slept, through sheer exhaustion, she could not withdraw her looks from that terrible and tremendous future into which they nevertheless plunged with horror and dismay.

For, what was to become of herself and children? Even if they remained beggars and subsisted by begging, even if the wretched avocation of mendicancy should raise up a slight barrier between themselves and actual starvation, what prospects were there for the poor innocents who now slept in her arms or with their heads upon her lap? Had the trade of the street-beggar no contamination? Was it not the apprenticeship for the more finished and perilous pursuits of the thief? And how could she hope that her children would pass unharmed through the terrible ordeal?

Oh, her anguish knew no bounds when she thought of all this; and she wept in silence over her sleeping children, but, great God! what bitter tears were those which she thus shed in torrents! Talk of the pains of the rack, the question by water, the thumbscrew, and the iron boot; talk of the agony attendant upon the most fearful surgical operations which are known to men; talk of the mental excruciation endured at the instant when the criminal stands upon the drop with the executioner fastening the halter about his neck; talk of the rapid gush of poignant feelings which traverse the brain of the drowning wretch, — oh, all these were an enviable paradise compared with the rending misery which that poor woman suffered while thus she foreshadowed the appalling pictures of the future.

A night of brain-searing sensations was that which she passed; and on the morrow she turned out into the streets again, holding the babe in her arms and with the other three children clinging to her scanty vesture.

Presently an old lady, followed by a handsome footman in gorgeous livery, passed slowly down Whitehall. The flunkey carried a French poodle in his arms, for the beast was so pampered as to be unable to walk; and the old lady would rather have heard that an entire city, with hundreds of thousand of human creatures, had been swallowed up by an earthquake, than that her obese poodle suffered the slightest ill-treatment. With stately step did the flunkey march behind his mistress; for he too was fat and sleek with good living, and there was a certain air of conscious importance about him, as if he were something more to the old lady than a mere footman. And just at the very moment that he was passing the poor family, he took a piece of rich cake from his pocket and held it conveniently to the dog's mouth, so that the brute might eat it without the necessity of moving anything but its jaws; and the old lady, glancing behind her, threw a look of approval upon the domestic when she saw how careful he was of her beloved poodle. But, oh, what famished, eager, hungry looks did the poor children cast on that piece of nice rich cake which the dog ate so lazily and with such indifference! Then Mrs. Melmoth advanced, timidly advanced, with her sickly babe in her arms, and besought the lady to give her a few pence, for the love of God. But the old dame absolutely shrank in disgust to the very edge of the pavement; and turning around to the domestic, bade him hurry on, "lest the dog should catch vermin or some nasty disease from those filthy beggars."

Such were her words; and yet the poor woman and her children were as cleanly as poverty would allow them to be, ay, and although they had neither shoes nor stockings on their feet.

And the wealthy dame, who expended gold upon her beloved dog, passed rapidly on, followed by her pampered menial; and on arriving at the house whither she was proceeding to pay a morning visit, she launched forth in a pathetic strain upon the shocking increase of beggars.

Anon there came a bishop down Whitehall. His lordship was on foot that day, because he had lent one of his carriages

to the mistress whom he pensioned magnificently, and another to a married daughter whose prostitution to a Minister had obtained the reverend old gentleman his see. With an air half-dignified and half-sanctimonious did the bishop advance, wearing that sort of humility which seems to say, " Look at my meekness! " and with a bunch of gold seals dangling over his silk apron. Having bestowed a haughty bend of the head upon a poor curate who bowed to the earth as he passed by, — this same curate performing more duties in a week at the rate of forty pounds a year than the bishop had done in all his life, — his lordship's eyes fell upon the poor family. Timidly and tearfully, dragging herself along with a painfulness that was as evident as the sun shining overhead, did Mrs. Melmoth accost the proud prelate. But that man of God, that religious old impostor who preached of Jesus riding on an ass, and kept two carriages, that worldly hypocrite who denounced riches from the pulpit and received twenty thousand a year from the labour, toil, and industry of the people, that hoary old sinner who voted for Sabbath bills while he kept a mistress and fattened upon the fruits of his daughter's adultery and shame, this old bishop it was who sternly bade the starving woman " go and work for her bread and not bring up her children in idleness."

Then the man of God passed on his way, to lunch with another prelate and deplore the inefficiency of the laws to put down mendicants, nor troubled himself as to what the real meaning of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus may be.

Presently there passed down Whitehall two young officers arm in arm, — two of those aristocratic jackanapes who don the red coat ere they are well loosened from their titled mammas' apron-strings, and whose commissions in the army are procured by purchase. These lace-bedizened monkeys were smoking cigars, leering insolently at every pretty girl they met, fancying themselves irresistible in the trumpery gaud of their flaming apparel, and thinking it an excellent joke because they had been locked up all night in a watch-house for stealing knockers from front doors. Humbly did the eldest boy of the starving family accost these gallant gentlemen, who seemed to be laughing so good-humouredly; but the moment he dared to present the ragged and fam-

ished spectacle of his personal appearance to the noble notice of those lordlings, the one turned aside in disgust, as if he sniffed the foul air of a pestilence, and the other looked anxiously around for a constable. In fine, they passed on without even throwing the poor boy a halfpenny; and within an hour they each lost a thousand pounds at cards and dice.

Soon afterward the humble curate who saluted the bishop with such profound respect and received so haughty an acknowledgment in return, that same curate who preached three sermons every Sunday and attended to the duties of a large parish for forty pounds a year, returned slowly down Whitehall. He caught sight of the poor family, he paused and put his hand into his pocket. Heaven knows there was little enough there; and what there was he needed for his own poor family at home. But he drew forth a shilling and as a tear trembled upon the lash of the worthy man, he presented it to Mrs. Melmoth, saying, in a tone tremulous with emotion, "My poor woman, I am sorry, very sorry that I can spare you no more. But —"

And, as his heart grew too full for further utterance, the humble curate, the real minister of the lowly Jesus, hurried away to hide his feelings and escape the outpourings of gratitude which followed his sublime benevolence.

Then the Melmoth family broke their fast; and the bread which the poor mother ate was moistened with her tears, as she contrasted in her mind the behaviour of the pompous bishop and that of the hard-working, half-starved, and spirit-broken curate.

On returning to the station which she had chosen for her piteous pursuit in Whitehall, Mrs. Melmoth was speedily wrapped in a mournful reverie, from which she was awakened by a private soldier who accosted her. He was a fine, tall, handsome fellow, whose noble form set off the uniform which he wore to far greater advantage than if it had been embellished by the insignia of an officer; and his intellectual countenance, marked with an air of decision, contrasted strongly with the ignoble, dissipated, and effeminate looks of the two lordlings who had passed some hours previously. This private soldier, a man sprung from the common people, but one of nature's nobles, addressed Mrs. Melmoth in a kind manner; and, having uttered a few words of sympathy, he put in her hand all the money he possessed, a few halfpence,

and walked rapidly away. Yet that man bore upon his back, beneath the king's uniform, the deep scars and the long wales indelibly imprinted on his flesh by the accursed cat-o'-nine-tails; and he was likewise a marked man in his regiment, because he had been once caught reading a book written in praise of the French Revolution.

The curate's and the private soldier's money was all that the Melmoths obtained on the second day of their mendicant life; and in the evening they returned to the low lodging-house where for a few pence they obtained shelter. The children soon slept; but the unhappy, almost heart-broken mother was some hours before she could close her eyes in slumber. And ere a feverish and uneasy rest came over her, she tried to pray, but she could not. No, she could not bring herself to pray; for she began to doubt the existence of a God. Never, never in all her life had she committed a deed of which she was ashamed. A good daughter had she been, a good wife and mother had she proved; and wherefore, then, was she thus cruelly persecuted? Why was she doomed to behold her children less cared for by the world than a wretched poodle-dog? Wherefore was she so completely crushed, weighed down, and overpowered by an appalling sense of utter misery, that she wished herself dead, and already felt thoughts of suicide creeping into her brain, accompanied by terrible ideas of murder in respect to her children? No, she could not pray; she had no hope left, scarcely any faith, and without faith in Heaven and hope that it will hear the proffered prayer, how could she force her lips to frame the pious intercession?

And even if she could have prayed, oh, what a place was it to pray in! Within the four walls of a low room, blackened by smoke, and filled with an atmosphere that seemed stagnant in its pestilential density, were crowded together the vilest specimens of all vile characters and the most miserable of the immense brotherhood of wretchedness. While the candle was still burning, the looks of licentious effrontery which the women wore and the ferocious aspect of the men filled Mrs. Melmoth with mingled disgust and alarm; and when the light was extinguished, the ribald discourse that was still continued for some time seemed to derive fresh horrors from the darkness. And then she pictured to herself that the time must come when her boys would grow

up to be as ruffian-like as those men, and her daughters as shameless and abandoned as those women. Oh, how could prayers ascend from such a place to the throne of the Eternal? How could human lips venture to offer up either thanksgivings or entreaties from such a polluted atmosphere?

On the morrow the mendicant family issued forth again, and on this day did they glean from the hand of humble charity enough to purchase bread and pay for the next night's shelter. For the well dressed and the rich bestowed little or nothing, but either turned away in disgust, or else talked of constables and the House of Correction.

Six or seven days more passed in the same manner; and thus was it that the wretched mother and the hapless children sustained an existence which they could not value, and learned those bitter lessons that constitute the experience acquired by poverty.

One night, — the same as that on which the masquerade took place at Covent Garden Theatre, — the poor woman and her children were huddled as usual in the corner of the room. The light was extinguished, but the air felt hot and sickly in that crowded place. Mrs. Melmoth's two boys and the girl were sleeping soundly, and the sickly babe was endeavouring to draw some sustenance from her withered bosom. She herself was lost in one of those deep, desponding moods which are broken from time to time by pangs of poignant anguish shooting through the heart and brain, as lightning flashes athwart the murky night, when her attention was slowly and, as it were, insensibly drawn to the conversation which was going on amongst several of the other lodgers in that room. In fact, she found herself listening almost before she spontaneously gave her attention to the discourse; but its nature speedily riveted her curiosity with its fearful and appalling interest.

"What is that you're saying, Job Minks?" asked a fellow, arousing from his slumbers and catching something which had been uttered by the individual thus addressed.

"Why, he was a-telling of us a story that he's inwented hisself, and that I don't believe for a minute," said another.

"But I tell you that it's true," exclaimed the man, who answered to the euphonious name of Job Minks; "and I not only heard it from a pal of mine this morning, but I

read it in the paper at the Beggar's Staff, where I happened to be in the afternoon."

"Well, what is it?" demanded the fellow who had just walked up. "I heerd you a-saying something about tearing up bodies from their graves —"

"And so I did," interrupted Minks; "and once more I tell you it's true. For the last three or four nights there have been bodies torn up from their graves in the burying-grounds of different parts of London; and the corpses have been found all rent limb from limb and horribly mutilated."

"But who the devil can amuse hisself in such a fashion?" demanded the man who had so recently awakened.

"Ah! that's more than I can tell you, Buss," answered Minks, "and the 'thorities would give their ears to find out. It seems that the first affair of the kind took place in Old St. Pancras churchyard four nights ago. When the sexton went to open the church in the morning for a weddin' that was to take place, to his horror and astonishment he saw a grave opened, and the body lying on the top of the earth that had been thrown up. The corpse was that of an old gentleman who had been buried a few days before, and it was mutilated in a shocking manner. It was clear enough that the person who did all this must have had some implement to dig out the earth; for mutilation had been accomplished by a blunt instrument, such as a spade."

"This is really dreadful," exclaimed Buss. "And yet I ain't a feller to be shocked at a trifle, neither."

It is almost needless to observe that Mrs. Melmoth shuddered with an indescribable horror throughout her entire being as she listened to this appalling narrative. Her poverty, her misery, and even the wretchedness of her children were forgotten for the moment in the fearful interest which absorbed all her faculties and sensations, and the perspiration stood in large drops upon her brow. The hideous nature of the narrative acquired a deeper and more tremendous interest from the fact that it was told in the midst of a profound darkness, and in a place thronged with characters of the vilest and most polluted description. In a word, the effect produced upon her was as if a loathsome snake were slowly coiling itself around her person, enveloping her closer and closer in its slimy folds, and exhaling its pestilential breath in her face while every moment she

expected its head would come in cold and clammy contact with her cheek. Such was the revolting sensation excited by the scarcely credible tale that the man was recounting.

"Dreadful, indeed!" he exclaimed, in ejaculatory echo of the remark made by his friend Buss. "There never was such a thing known before, at least, so the papers say. For, mark you, this is no affair in which resurrection-men are engaged, nor yet robbers. Body-snatchers don't leave the corpse behind them; and the day's gone by when people were buried with rings on their fingers. So it ain't for the anatomy-shops that it's done, neither is it thieves that do it."

"Then what can it be for?" demanded Buss.

"Ah! that's more than I can tell you," responded Job Minks. "The second affair took place in Shoreditch churchyard, and the third in St. Matthew's, Bethnal Green. In this last place, two bodies were found torn up out of their graves, horribly mutilated, and with the winding-sheets rent to shreds. There's quite a panic in all those neighbourhoods, I can tell you."

"No wonder," observed Buss.

"But what are the 'thorities going to do?" asked another listener.

"What can they do, but fill the burying-grounds with man-traps and spring-guns and set a watch at night?" exclaimed Job Minks. "The papers say that this has been done in most of the churchyards in London and the suburbs; and so the chap, whoever he is, will be pretty sure to be caught. The resurrectionists, too, must take care of themselves now," added Minks, "or they'll be getting riddled with bullets or have their legs caught in a trap. In Old St. Pancras there's a watch set with bloodhounds."

"And this is really true, and no larking, Job?" said Buss, still incredulous.

"Well, all I can say is that a pal of mine told me of it first," was the answer; "and then I read all about it in a newspaper that Carrotty Poll lent me at the Staff in Horsly-down."

"Them's your vouchers, eh?" observed Buss. "Well, I don't say that I sha'n't believe it, but I must confess it's precious startling. Your pal might have read it also, and we know the papers tell the most infernal lies sometimes."

"So they do," exclaimed Job Minks; "but let me tell you that my pal didn't read it at all, for the plain and simple reason that he can't read. Neither did he have it read to him; but it was the sexton of Old St. Pancras which told him all about it, seeing that he went to bury his sister there yesterday morning."

"Ah! that's different," observed Buss. "But I s'pose it's some Bedlamite that's broke loose and is amusing hisself in this uncommon style."

"Or else it must be a cannibal," suggested another listener.

"Or p'r'aps some desperate wretch driven by sheer starvation to dig up dead bodies and eat them," remarked a third.

"It may be a madman, but it is not a cannibal," said Minks; "for it don't appear that he has made a meal on the corpses. His delight seems to be to hack and hew them to pieces; and in all this there's what the papers call a fiendish revelry in the horrible pastime of exhuming and mutilating the dead."

"Shall I tell you what I think of the matter?" exclaimed a voice which Mrs. Melmoth did not remember to have heard previously joining in the conversation.

"Is that you, old Tiddleywink?" demanded Buss. "Why, I thought you was fast asleep long ago. I heerd you a-snoring."

"No, you didn't; it was somebody else," was the reply. "I've been listening all along to every word our friend Minks has been telling us, and, what is more, I believe every word, too. For the whole thing puts me in mind of certain accounts that I have read in books; and you'll find out, in the long run, that the hands which are now exhuming bodies and mutilating them so horribly are not those of a madman, nor yet of a cannibal, nor yet of a desperate wretch goaded on by starvation."

These remarks were made with a solemnity and an emphasis which produced a strange and awe-inspiring effect upon all who heard them, and a deep silence of more than a minute ensued. That silence, following so closely upon the hideous narrative which had just been related, had in it something of a tomblike horror and a sepulchral gloom, especially when the idea was associated with that of the pitchy darkness which prevailed in the chamber.

Mrs. Melmoth felt her blood curdling in her veins; and as she pressed the now sleeping babe more closely to her bosom, she shrank up, as it were, within herself, as if she fancied that the cold hand of a corpse was about to clutch her by the shoulder.

"And so them's your opinions, old Tiddleywink, be they?" exclaimed Buss, at length breaking silence. "But I s'pose, since you speak with such a air of authority, you can wentur' a guess as to who or what it is that has been playing such precious pranks with the dead 'uns?"

"Well, I have an opinion on that point," said the individual thus appealed to; "and you may depend upon it that the result will show I haven't been far wrong. For, according to what I've read in books, — and you must remember I was a schoolmaster once, before the tyranny of the parson of the parish ruined me and I was driven out into the streets to become, first a beggar, and then a member of that class of people who find things before they are lost —"

"A wery delicate way of expressin' the noble perfession of prig and buzgloak," interjected the man who rejoiced in the name of Buss.

"Come, don't stop him with observations in that manner," cried Job Minks. "What was you going to say, old feller?"

"Simply this," was the response: "that, according to what I've read in books, it is not by any means the first or the twentieth time that instances have occurred of graves being opened, bodies dragged forth, and horrible mutilations accomplished. In England, perhaps, the thing is rare, but on the Continent it has been frequent enough. And the perpetrator of these atrocities is not a resurrectionist, nor a thief, nor a madman, nor a cannibal, nor a starving wretch made desperate by hunger; no, it is nothing of all these, I can assure you."

"Then what is it?" demanded several voices, with that shuddering accent which denotes a presentiment of some appalling reply to the question put.

"What is it?" repeated the ex-schoolmaster, in a tone of mingled horror and solemnity. "It is a being of whom you have all doubtless heard, but whose existence may have seemed fabulous; a being whose very name is sufficient to make the blood run cold and the hair stand on end!"

"But this being — what is it?" again cried many voices.

"A vampire!" was the astounding answer.

Ejaculations of horror followed this announcement; and Mrs. Melmoth felt a sensation come over her as if she were about to faint.

"Yes, the perpetrator of those atrocities which you have heard related this night," continued the ex-schoolmaster, "must be none other than a vampire. And now that you know there is a vampire in London, I warn you to take care of yourselves, — how you pass through churchyards by night, how you trust yourselves in lonely places near suburban cemeteries, ay, and how you sleep in dark rooms without knowing who are your companions and who may happen to be huddled up alongside of you."

"Good God! is there any danger of such a thing?" exclaimed Buss, starting up from the wretched flock mattress on which he was stretched.

"Danger!" repeated the ex-schoolmaster, in a tone of mingled irony and terror, "to be sure there is. Can you doubt it? Do you know, or do you not know of what a vampire is capable? Well, I will explain it to you. He will insinuate himself into a company such as ours now present, he will sit down and converse in the most agreeable manner, he will hire a lodging for the night in the same room, — for example, in such a place as this, — and he will stretch himself down on his mattress like all the rest of us. Then, when the light is put out and everybody else is sleeping, this vampire will either strangle some unfortunate wretch at once, or else will fasten his teeth upon his flesh while still living and begin to drink his blood. This is what a vampire will do; and now I should like to know whether people of our stamp, who are forced to frequent these kind of places, should be cautious or not?"

Renewed ejaculations of horror burst from those on whose ears this fearful description and awful warning fell; and Mrs. Melmoth, though a woman of good sterling common sense, felt herself overwhelmed with terrors which in the broad sunlight and the open air would not have exercised even a moment's influence upon her. But in the midst of that deep darkness, in the society of wretches of the lowest and most depraved character, and with her mind previously attenuated by her own harrowing thoughts and desponding

reflections, she naturally became an easy prey to the dominion of that horrible superstitious alarm which seized upon all the rest.

"By God!" exclaimed Buss, "I would sooner walk about the streets all night than run the risk of encountering the vampire in a lodging-house."

While he was yet speaking, the door of the room was opened, and some one entered.

"Vampire!" cried the newcomer, closing the door behind him, and it was the voice of a man that thus spoke, "who the devil is talking of vampires, and what do you know of them?"

But at that same instant an ejaculation burst from the lips of some female in the room, and then all was still.

"What was that?" said Job Minks, after a pause, during which the silence of the tomb had prevailed.

"It was some woman frightened by old Tiddleywink's description of the vampire," observed one of the occupants of the chamber.

"Well, it struck me to be rather a cry of joy at something or another," said the ex-schoolmaster; "though what anybody could have to rejoice at in such a place and at this hour, I cannot well understand. But who is the newcomer? Let him announce himself in a proper manner; for it has become necessary to take all kinds of precautions in respect to strangers."

"Well," said the voice of the individual who had just entered, "you may call me Toby Firebrand, for that's the name I'm known by amongst my pals. But how the devil am I to grope my way to a mattress?"

"There's none in this part of the room," said Buss.

"Nor yet here," added Job Minks.

"And there isn't a hair's breadth of space to spare in this corner," exclaimed the ex-schoolmaster.

"Ah! I suppose you take me for the vampire you were all talking about when I entered the chamber a minute ago?" said the newcomer, with a mocking laugh. "But what made the old landlady assure me that there was plenty of room in this chamber? I'll go and make her refund me my halfpence, and then take myself off to another place. So good night to ye all."

And with these words the individual who had announced

himself as Toby Firebrand took his departure, slamming the door behind him.

The noise recalled Mrs. Melmoth to her senses; for she it was who had given utterance to that ejaculation which followed the entrance of Toby Firebrand, and she had fainted immediately afterward.

Collecting her scattered ideas as well as she was able, she strove to ascertain whether a certain impression which was uppermost in her mind was a feature in a troubled dream or a fact which had really occurred.

"That voice — surely it was Melmoth's," she said to herself, a hundred times in a minute; and then, as the whole conversation which she had overheard respecting the vampire came back to her memory, the very words which Toby Firebrand had uttered likewise flashed to her recollection:

"Vampire! who the devil is talking of vampires, and what do you know of them?"

Yes, these were the words he had spoken; and if she could thus recall them so accurately to her mind, and if they so closely connected themselves with the previous conversation, she felt tolerably well assured that the impression left upon her brain was no delusion.

And this impression was that the newcomer was none other than her husband, — that husband who had been so ruthlessly torn from her by the despotic authority of the Home Office. and whom she supposed to be far away. Oh, if it were indeed he, if it were really his voice which she had heard, and which had suddenly sounded like welcome music to her ear through the deep darkness of the night and the hot atmosphere of that miserable chamber — if, in fine, the father of her mendicant children was actually restored to her, and was there, in that very room, perhaps close by her side, at all events, not many feet distant from the corner where she lay crouched up, oh, if this were indeed the case, what happiness now awaited her!

So powerfully wrought were her feelings as these thoughts traversed her mind, that she could not immediately give utterance to the question which her lips nevertheless strove hard to breathe. For she knew not that, during the brief interval of her unconsciousness, the man whose voice elicited that ejaculation of joy from her tongue had

taken his departure, to seek some other lodging for the night.

"Melmoth? Does any one answer to the name of Melmoth?" she at length inquired, in a faltering tone and with deep suspense at the heart.

But no one replied to the query.

"Who are you asking for, my good woman?" said the ex-schoolmaster, after a long pause. "There doesn't appear to be any person of such a name in the place."

"But that man, who came in just now, at the moment when you were all discoursing on a frightful topic?" observed Mrs. Melmoth, in a half-stifling voice and with cruel palpitations of the heart.

"Oh, he went away immediately again," returned the ex-schoolmaster. "He said his name was Toby Firebrand, and as there wasn't room for him in this place, he took his departure."

Mrs. Melmoth said nothing more. Her feelings were suffocating, for scarcely had a gleam of hope flashed athwart the gloom of her prospects when it disappeared in an instant. But at the next moment she was consoled, and indeed cheered, by the remembrance that her husband was, at all events, in London; for that it was his voice which she had heard she felt convinced.

Not once did she close her eyes in slumber that night; and so soon as the first solitary and wire-drawn glimmering of day stole into the chamber, she aroused her children from their sleep. Then in their ears did she whisper the glad tidings that their father was returned and that they might hope to see him soon; and it was therefore with lighter hearts than usual that they all sallied forth from the low lodging-house to wander about the metropolis in search of a husband and a parent.

CHAPTER II

THE MILLINER AND THE HANDSOME FOOTMAN

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon of the day following the masquerade, and Mrs. Brace was seated alone in her parlour, pondering upon the various difficulties which surrounded her.

In the first place there was Mobbs, who would evidently become a rapacious extortioner; then there was Frederick Dray, who had already darted amorous glances upon her, and had lost all the respect with which he had formerly been wont to treat her; next there was Harriet, who, although faithful and devoted, must nevertheless be provided for; and lastly, there was the chance of some unlucky or providential circumstance transpiring to afford a trace to the murder of the head constable of Bow Street. In fact, the wretched milliner not only found herself completely in the power of these persons who would look to her purse as a constant means of supplying all their wants, but she likewise felt that she should ever be exposed to the insolence of Mobbs, the arrogance of the footman, and the pretensions of the lady's-maid.

Mobbs was to return in the evening. What would he require of her, and how should she act? Frederick Dray's murderous intention of the preceding night had been defeated in the manner already described, and Mrs. Brace knew not whether the footman still entertained the same project. She shuddered when she thought that he possibly might; and yet there was a secret hope at the bottom of her soul that he had not abandoned the idea of assassination. For if Mobbs were put out of the way, the most brutal of the three depositors of her secret would be removed from her path; and then — oh, did not the thought steal into the

mind of the wretched woman that she might perhaps find means to silence Frederick Dray likewise for ever?

So true is the saying that one crime needs a dozen others to conceal it.

Then again, if once those two depositors of her secret were thus removed, might she not dispose of her establishment, realize her property, and repair to America? Harriet was no particular object of alarm, and might accompany her. Yes, this was an excellent plan; and the milliner even found heart enough to smile as it slowly developed itself in her thoughts.

She was in the midst of this reverie when the door opened and Frederick Dray entered the room.

His countenance wore a sinister expression, which instantly produced a disagreeable effect upon Mrs. Brace and caused a sensation of uneasiness to creep over her. She half-started from her chair, then sank back into it; and, fixing her eyes intently upon the man's features, she endeavoured to read all that was passing in his mind.

"Madam, are we not to have a few minutes' conversation together?" he said, lounging negligently against the high back of an armchair; "for I think I understood from you that the scoundrel Mobbs is to return to-night."

"Yes, he will return," answered Mrs. Brace; "and — as you say, Frederick — we — we — must deliberate — "

"Don't labour under any embarrassment with me, my dear madam," interrupted the footman. "Henceforth we must row in the same boat, if we wish to save our necks from a halter."

And, without any further ceremony, he deposited himself quietly and comfortably in the armchair opposite to the one occupied by his mistress; and leaning back, he stretched out his legs toward the fire, just for all the world as if he were the master of the house.

"You have some plan in your head, then, Frederick?" observed Mrs. Brace, not daring to remonstrate with him for his impertinence.

"Plan! Egad, I've got it all cut and dried, my dear madam," returned the footman, in a flippant, self-sufficient, offhand manner; "and I hope that it will suit you in all its details."

"Proceed," said the milliner, already suspecting that

Dray was revolving in his mind something more than even the murder of Mobbs, and that he had ulterior views beyond the mere disposal of the ex-constable.

"In the first place, my dear lady," continued Frederick, in a tone of familiarity, "let us thoroughly understand the point from which we are to start. In plain terms, then," he added, fixing his eyes keenly upon her countenance, "Peter Grumley did not die of apoplexy, but you murdered him."

"You dare not thus accuse me!" exclaimed the milliner, in a hoarse, choking voice, while her magnificent bust heaved and fell with a long, convulsive movement.

"What is the use of entertaining me with such language as that?" demanded Dray, his whole manner denoting an insolent confidence. "Did you not ask me last night whether this additional crime was necessary? But that admission on your part only confirmed the suspicions that already dwelt in my mind. Besides, did you not lend yourself to my plan to make away with Mobbs, and if you had not previously done a trifle in the murder way, would you have fallen so easily into the latter scheme? But what difference does it make, after all? The corpse lies buried in this house, and, if discovered, will be enough to get us all hanged."

"What, then, do you propose?" asked Mrs. Brace, no longer daring to dispute with the footman relative to the mode in which Grumley met his death.

"I propose to let Mobbs follow his superior officer," responded Dray, with a significant smile. "And now you see how much I am risking on your account, my dear lady; for nothing would be easier than for me to take myself off to America and leave you to deal with this Mobbs as best you may. But as I am confident he is not to be trusted, but will either betray the secret in a drunken moment, or else out of revenge the very first time you refuse to satisfy his extortionate demands, I therefore propose to put him out of your way altogether."

"And how — that is — by what plan?" faltered Mrs. Brace, in a low, thick tone.

"Not in a way that will shed blood and leave traces upon the floor," answered the footman. "Whatever we do, must be done safely. I suppose you poisoned Peter Grumley?

Well, an excellent method, too. Nothing more useful than a few drops of prussic acid to have in one's house. Ah! I see by your manner, then, that prussic acid it was. But I am afraid that Mobbs may smell a rat. He will be suspicious, upon his guard; and, depend upon it, he won't drink at your house again, or if he does, it will only be what he sees you drink likewise, ay, and first also. However, an idea strikes me. Do you think he will want to go down into the back kitchen again?"

"It is impossible for me to say," replied the milliner. "But, doubtless, if you particularly wished, I could entice him thither, upon some pretence."

"Be it so, and leave all the rest to me," exclaimed Frederick. "He shall be made away with as assuredly as his name is Mobbs, and when he lies under the stone along with Peter Grumley, I will guarantee that not a trace of the deed shall be left behind. And now, my dear Mrs. Brace, with your leave, I will take a glass of your excellent champagne, just to put me into spirits to unfold the rest of my plans."

The milliner rose mechanically from her seat, opened a cupboard, brought forth the wine, drew the cork, and filled a glass for Frederick Dray, as he reclined in lolling indolence in the armchair. Yes, the mistress waited upon the domestic; and the elegant, fashionable milliner of Pall Mall, the friend of the Prince of Wales and the depositress of many a noble lady's secrets and many an aristocratic frailty, was now in servile attendance upon her own lackey.

"You are as amiable and captivating in manners as you are agreeable in person," said he, as he looked amorously over the glass which he was raising to his lips.

Mrs. Brace now awoke, as it were, from a dream; or rather, her mind shook off the numbness which had crept upon it while the footman was detailing with such cold-blooded calmness his designs relative to Mobbs. She then perceived the immense error she had committed in so far compromising her dignity as to obey the man's commands relative to the wine, instead of at once taking a proper stand and assuming a decided attitude to convince him that there were certain limits beyond which he must not pass in his bearing toward her, no matter how grave were the interests that linked them. But, by at once succumbing to his arrogance, she had suffered him to gain a tremendous advantage over her;

and it was now no easy task to regain the ground which she had lost.

"Have the kindness to proceed with whatever you may have to say to me, Frederick," she observed, at length; "for should any one come in, the familiar manner which you have assumed toward me would excite the strangest suspicions."

"Familiar manner, indeed!" echoed Dray, in an offended tone. "Well, upon my word, that is rather an assumption on your part. Am I not about to commit a crime and endanger my safety in this world and my salvation in the next, entirely on your account? And do you think that I anticipate no reward? As a matter of course. Such a deed is worth its price, and that price must be paid to me."

"What recompense is it that you claim?" asked the milliner.

"Your hand, my dear, your hand in honourable marriage," replied Dray, sipping his champagne with a nonchalant ease and stretching out his legs with the air of a home secretary when giving a refusal to a deputation imploring that the life of some convict may be spared.

"Marriage!" echoed Mrs. Brace, in mingled anger and amazement; but, instantly recollecting herself, she said, "Surely you are not in earnest, Frederick? I thought you intended to marry Harriet."

"Harriet was all very well a little while ago, my dear lady," returned the man, with a supercilious air and an affected drawl; "but circumstances have transpired, you understand, to enable me to look to a more elevated position. You are a handsome woman, a very handsome woman; and I shall be proud of you as a wife. I am not particularly ill-favoured, and you need not be ashamed of me as a husband."

"But remember that I am older than you, Frederick, some years older," said Mrs. Brace, making a feint to contest a point which she was prepared to yield eventually, but only because she was now more than ever determined to rid herself of this importunate accomplice so soon as an opportunity should serve.

"Well, you may be a little older, my dear," observed Dray, growing more familiar alike in his manner and his language; "but you are a splendid creature, and I long to

pillow my head on that superb bosom which now sinks and rises so gently. Ah! often when I have stood behind your chair at dinner or supper-time, and looked over your shoulders to catch a glimpse of that bosom, I have thought to myself how happy should I be if you would only take a fancy to me. Then, when I have looked into your fine eyes, and beheld your beautiful white teeth shining between your moist red lips, I have felt such strange sensations come over me that I have more than once resolved to steal to your chamber in the middle of the night and either persuade or force you to submit to my wishes. And now at last, at last," continued Dray, his imagination heated with the wine which he was drinking and to which he was so utterly unaccustomed, " at last I stand upon the threshold of that gratification which I have so often and so deeply coveted. Ah! my dearest creature, you are indeed worthy that I should commit a crime to serve you, even though that crime be murder; but, on the other hand, you will not say that I am unworthy of an adequate reward? "

" No, I will not prove ungrateful to you, Frederick," answered Mrs. Brace, assuming a tender tone and fixing upon him an amorous look; though, notwithstanding the ardour of her lascivious nature, and despite of the fact that Dray was really a handsome young man, she experienced not the slightest inclination nor the faintest sensual impulse in his favour.

" Then you will consent to become my wife, dear Fanny? " said the man; and, placing the glass upon the table, he rose from his seat, approached the milliner, threw his arms about her neck, and fastened his lips greedily to her own.

" You naughty fellow, be quiet," said Mrs. Brace, gently repulsing him. " Let us do all that we have agreed upon and then we shall have leisure and opportunity to talk of love. Come, finish your champagne and retire; because I have several matters to attend to. And, by the bye, you will not say a word to Harriet at present."

" No, it is not worth while," remarked Frederick. " And yet the sooner I put the poor girl out of suspense, the better; for, to tell you the real truth, she is in a certain way — "

" Ah! I suspected as much," exclaimed Mrs. Brace. " Now really, Frederick, this is not generous on your part — "

" It may be ungenerous," he interrupted, surveying him-

self in the mirror over the mantel and caressing his whiskers, "but it would be far more stupid on my part to go and marry a low servant-girl who will present me with a child five months after our union, to the infinite amusement of all my waggish friends and joke-loving acquaintances."

"She is a genteel girl, and a pretty one," observed Mrs. Brace. "There is nothing low about her; and as for the other matter, why, it is easily alleged that you had been privately married for the last six months."

"The thing won't do, my dear, 'pon my soul, it won't," said Dray. "I couldn't fling myself away in that unconscionable manner; nor can I afford to lose such a dear, handsome, voluptuous creature as you are. No, what you and I have already settled is a bargain; and you must leave me to manage Harriet. So no more remonstrances upon that head. And now, what time is Mobbs to be here this evening?"

"He did not say," replied Mrs. Brace; "but I suppose that he will make his appearance soon after ten."

"Very well," exclaimed the footman. "Then you will entice him down into the back kitchen at about eleven, and not before. I shall be there, or else concealed close by. Don't ask me any questions now; for I have my plan ready cut and dried in my head, and I'll be bound to execute it properly. Of course you will take care to have all the servants in bed by half-past ten o'clock, except the chambermaid and the hall-porter belonging to the other house; and they won't be near to interfere with us. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," was the response.

"Then one kiss more, love," said Dray; "and I will leave you for the present to attend to your own affairs."

The milliner resigned her lips to the pressure of his own, and the self-sufficient footman then withdrew.

CHAPTER III

MOBBS AND HIS DOG AGAIN

THE clocks at the West End were chiming the half-hour after ten at night when Mr. Mobbs was ushered by Frederick Dray into the parlour where Mrs. Brace was awaiting his arrival.

The footman retired immediately; but ere he closed the door, he darted a keen, rapid, and significant glance at the milliner, to assure her that he had in no wise changed his mind in respect to the matter agreed upon between them.

Mobbs was followed by his dog, which he kicked savagely under a sofa, while he deposited himself in the same armchair that the footman had occupied with so much indolence a few hours previously; and, dropping his hat upon the carpet, he said, "Our business was interrupted in a queer manner last night, ma'am."

"Yes, and before you had stipulated the price of your secrecy in a certain affair, Mr. Mobbs," returned the milliner. "But the night is cold again; will you not take something to warm you?"

"Perhaps you'll have the kindness to tell me, ma'am, in the fust instance," said Mobbs, fixing his looks searchingly upon Mrs. Brace, "how my pal and superior, Peter Grumley, came by his death. I mean, in what way you did the job."

"Is it necessary to revert to all those horrors?" exclaimed the milliner. "Surely, surely, enough has already been said upon that most afflicting subject?"

"I told you last night that I must know all, and that I would then make terms with you," said Mobbs, in a dogged tone of determination. "Give me every explanation; 'cause it's natural that I should want to learn all the particklers connected with a matter that has deprived me of so

good a friend. Come, ma'am, I don't suppose you did it without assistance. At all events, if you made away with him by your hand alone, you could not have buried him beneath that there stone in the back kitchen unless you had help. So you see that you've a good deal yet to tell me."

"But if you are really inclined to make terms with me," said Mrs. Brace, now alarmed lest the man suspected her murderous designs toward himself and was laying some trap to ensnare her beforehand, "of what earthly use is it to you to ascertain all those particulars?"

"Don't be afeard of anything wrong, my dear lady," replied Mobbs. "I haven't the least intention to harm you or your accomplices, provided you deal fairly, frankly, and openly with me. But I would have you to know that I can see as far into a brick wall as most people; and I am, therefore, not blind to the fact that you must have had at least one confederate in the deed, or else in the concealment of the body."

"And if this were true?" said Mrs. Brace, trembling all over.

"Then I must be paid for keeping a secret that would hang two persons," replied Mobbs. "Now do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," answered the milliner, breathing more freely.

"And I must know the name of your accomplice, — who he is, where he lives, and all about him," proceeded Mobbs; "because, to speak plainly at once, I must have a handsome annuity from both of you."

"And suppose that I did the deed by myself, totally unassisted and alone?" said Mrs. Brace, interrogatively.

"Very likely you did," returned Mobbs, laconically. "In fact, I should think it most probable that you pisoned him; and, no offence, ma'am, but that's precisely the reason why I should rayther decline taking anything either short or warm, unless it was a sip out of a glass which you'd tasted fust."

"Good God! Mr. Mobbs," exclaimed the milliner, with well-affected horror and indignation; "you do not, you cannot suppose for a moment that I am capable of doing you a mischief, you who have behaved so kindly toward me?"

"Well, I don't say that you would, ma'am," observed the ex-constable, "but at the same time I can't say that you wouldn't. Howsomever, we won't dwell upon that pint. You admit, then, — or I'll take it for granted, — that you pisoned poor Grumley in a glass of liquor or what not. Well, but you couldn't raise a stone, dig a grave, put in the corpse, fill up the hole, replace the stone, and dispose of the extra soil, — you couldn't do all this, I say, without assistance; and therefore I want to know who did assist you."

"Mr. Mobbs, I will not deceive you any longer," said Mrs. Brace, affecting the mingled confusion and frankness of one who has been playing a game of duplicity, but is now determined to act with candour and sincerity. "The fact is, that your late master has not as yet been buried at all; and for the simple reason that I have not dared to make any one a confidant in this dreadful business."

"Then where is the corpse?" demanded Mobbs, roughly.

"In a place adjoining that very kitchen to which I conducted you last night," returned the milliner. "Oh, if you would only assist me to dispose of the body!" she exclaimed, in a well-assumed paroxysm of anguish, clasping her hands with apparent earnestness at the same time.

"Well, I dare say we can manage this business," said Mobbs. "But how came you to deceive me so grossly and so uselessly?"

"I will deal honestly with you now, at all events," replied the milliner. "The truth is, that I hoped to be able to get rid of the corpse in some way or another, either by burning it, or else nerving myself with sufficient courage to take some one into my confidence. Then, had you ever turned around upon me and proclaimed that the corpse of a murdered man lay beneath the pavement of the back kitchen, the result of a search would have refuted your evidence and, indeed, stamped it with falsehood. These were my motives for misleading you, Mr. Mobbs; but I hope you will pardon me."

"Well, well," said the man, altogether deluded by the apparent contrition which marked the manner of Mrs. Brace, and by the air of sincerity with which she spoke, "it is useless to blame you, 'cause that won't mend matters. So, after all, you had no accomplice whatsomever?"

"Not any," replied Mrs. Brace.

"And the corpse still remains above ground?" added Mobbs, inquiringly.

"Yes, in a small dark place adjoining the back kitchen, and of which I have got the key," was the answer.

"Now, should you think a thousand pounds too much to give me for helping you to get rid of the corpse and for keeping your secret ever afterward?" demanded the ex-constable, fixing his eyes keenly upon the milliner's countenance.

"A thousand pounds!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, affecting surprise at this specimen of exorbitance. "Oh, Mr. Mobbs, where do you think I am to get such a sum all in a moment?"

"Well, I don't require it all down upon the nail," observed the man; "but half now and half in a fortnit."

"I suppose that you must have your own way; I am completely in your power, completely," said the milliner, in a tone of lamentation. "But you will first help me to dispose of the body?"

"Oh, that's a part of the bargain," replied Mobbs. "And what you said to deceive me shall now be done in earnest. I mean, that we'll bury the corpse under the stones in the back kitchen, unless you've any better plan in view."

"No, I can suggest nothing better," returned the milliner. Then, glancing at the timepiece on the mantel, she said, "It is now eleven o'clock, and all the servants have no doubt retired to their rooms."

"Well and good," observed Mobbs, rising from his seat. "We'll go and do our work at once, and then you shall hand me over the shiners."

Mrs. Brace took up a candle and led the way down to the back kitchen, followed by Mobbs, at whose heels the dog trotted along. All was still, all was silent, in the lower region of the establishment; and the place was lighted only by the candle which the milliner carried in her hand.

On reaching the back kitchen, she cast her eyes hurriedly around; but Frederick Dray was not there. For an instant she was confounded, but the next moment recovering her presence of mind, she recollected he had said that if he were not in the place itself, he should be close by. And at the same time that this reflection flashed to her brain, she observed that a rope had been passed through a hook in the ceiling, and that one end was fastened to a nail in the upright plank supporting a row of shelves.

The dog began smelling around the stone, as on the former occasion; and Mobbs, struck by this circumstance, remarked that "it was singular the beast should get upon such a false scent." Then, as he caught a glimpse of some peculiarity about the mortar which fixed the stone in its setting, he stooped down and touched it with his finger.

At the same instant a side door, communicating with a closet used to hold firewood, was dashed open, and Frederick Dray, springing forth, threw himself with all his power upon the ex-constable.

"At him, Toby!" thundered the man, as he struggled desperately beneath the strong and vigorous Dray; but the dog only drew back into a corner, and growled with a low, savage, menacing, and continuous sound, as if on the point of flying at the assailant of his master.

But all that now took place was the work of a few moments, the terrible work of a wondrously short space, considering the tremendous magnitude of the deed.

For Mrs. Brace, with extraordinary presence of mind, hastened to succour the murderous proceeding of her domestic. Depositing the candle upon the dresser, she unfastened the rope from the nail, so that it ran through the hook in the ceiling, and the other end, which was formed into a noose, hung down within reach of Frederick Dray.

Meantime this desperate man had succeeded in keeping Mobbs down upon the pavement of the kitchen; and grasping his victim's head with both his hands, he raised it a little and then dashed it down with such savage violence upon the stones to produce a stunning effect. Then, snatching at the noose, he slipped it over the ex-constable's head, and, instantaneously drawing it tight about his neck, sprang to his feet. At the same moment new life appeared to animate Mobbs; and likewise raising himself up before Dray could possibly prevent him, he struggled to release his neck from the rope.

But the murderer snatched the cord from Mrs. Brace and pulled it tight, retreating at the same time to a distance from the spot where the victim was writhing and plunging and struggling desperately; while the milliner, getting behind the miserable ex-constable, caught hold of his arms and pinioned him.

The distortions of the man's countenance were horrible;

but not a cry escaped him, not a word could he utter. The noose was strangling him; and while the foam came from his lips, the tongue lolled out, and the eyes were starting from his head, the murderer pulled him up till his head came in violent contact with the hook through which the halter ran.

Awful were the writhings of the strangling wretch, as he raised the arms on which Mrs. Brace had been compelled to abandon her hold; and frightful were the workings of the countenance that was now livid, swollen, and marked with veins that seemed like knotted cords beneath the skin. But in a few moments his arms dropped by his side, the convulsions of his body and the drawing up of his legs rapidly lost their spasmodic violence, and, after a long quivering of the entire frame and a nervous working of the fingers, all motion ceased.

But while this hideous tragedy was in progress, the dog had emerged from the corner; and, when his master was hoisted into the air, the animal leaped up at him to lick his hand, a moaning noise now superseding the continuous growl of menace which its mouth had previously sent forth.

When, however, the poor beast saw that Mobbs had become motionless and was dangling to the ceiling like a bundle of clothes, an instinctive feeling seemed to make the dog aware that its master was dead; and sneaking into the remotest, darkest corner, it began to whine in a piteous manner.

"For Heaven's sake, silence that brute, Frederick," exclaimed Mrs. Brace, who was trembling all over and the ghastly pallor of whose countenance appeared through the vermeil tint which art had shed upon her cheeks. "It will alarm the house."

The footman seized the poker and advanced toward the dog; but the beast, apparently comprehending his hostile intention, rushed past him and sprang up the stairs.

"I will go and let the animal out," said Frederick, taking up the candle.

"My God! do not leave me here all alone, and in the dark!" cried Mrs. Brace, with imploring voice and manner; and she hurried after the footman, pursued by an appalling terror lest the dead man should descend from his halter and creep stealthily behind her.

On reaching the summit of the kitchen stairs she paused and clung to the railings for support, a complete consternation now overpowering her and making her feel as if she were walking in a dream. For all the horrors of that most horrible drama in which she had just played so prominent a part appeared suddenly to accumulate upon her head, concentrating all their fury, all their intensity, all their direst, deepest, most penetrating influence, in order the more thoroughly to harrow up her soul and wring her breast with ineffable tortures. Her brain was on fire, barbed arrows were inflicting their agonies upon her heart, every nerve, fibre, and tendon was strung to a degree of tension producing an effect as if the chords which bound her to existence were all scorching in flames and would part, snap, and shrivel up in an instant.

Meantime Frederick Dray had been looking about in the passage and the hall in search of the dog; but the animal was nowhere to be found. He went into the neighbouring rooms the doors of which stood open; he looked under all the furniture and behind the curtains, but all in vain. The mongrel was not there; and, muttering an imprecation against the dog, the footman returned to his mistress, whom he found in a most deplorable condition. She had sunk upon the top stair of the kitchen flight, and was cowering down in a bent position with her hands upon her knees and her eyes glaring wildly. But the moment the light which Dray carried in his hand illumined the darkness again, and when she found that her companion in crime was once more by her side, she recovered herself somewhat.

But Dray, perceiving how strong a hold her terrors had gained upon her, and how speedily all their influence would be revived by even the most trifling cause, concealed from her the fact that he had not found the dog; and in answer to a question concerning the brute, he at once assured her that he had put it out of the house.

Catching some portion of the desperate energy and cold-blooded hardihood which inspired that bold bad man, she raised herself up from the stair and begged him to lead the way to her own parlour, that she might procure some brandy. This was done; and she now felt equal to assist in the work which was yet to be performed.

Descending once more to the back kitchen, the murderer

and murderess commenced the remaining act of their appalling drama. First they lowered the corpse. Then Frederick Dray set to work to raise the stone which covered the remains of Peter Grumley. The shovelling out of the earth was accomplished far more easily than on the previous occasion, inasmuch as it was comparatively soft from that recent disturbance of its solid mass; and in about an hour's time the livid corpse of Grumley was exposed to view.

Mrs. Brace threw a shuddering glance into the grave, then turned away sick at heart and sick at soul; sick at heart with a sense of loathsome disgust, sick at soul through reviving horror at the tremendous turpitude of which she had been guilty.

And now the corpse of Mobbs was tossed into the hole, and Frederick Dray shovelled back the soil with a vigorous arm. In another hour that portion of the task was accomplished The superfluous earth was then disposed of as on the previous occasion, the stone was restored to its setting in a like manner, and all was accomplished.

And now the murderer and the murderess looked each other in the face for almost the first time during upwards of two hours; and while Dray fixed his looks with gloating sensuousness upon the milliner, the latter gazed upon him with a wild and vacant curiosity, as if to satisfy herself that all which had just passed was otherwise than a dream, and that his presence there was a proof of the deed in which he had played so important a part.

Then, as he slowly led her away from the kitchen, that man of indomitable hardihood whispered in her ears his intention to pass the remainder of the night in her company; and, although at the first intimation of this desire on his part, she recoiled from him as if his touch were that of a serpent, — as if, indeed, he was alone the murderer, and she was pure and immaculate, — yet at the next moment she was seized with a sudden joy at the idea of not being doomed to pass the rest of that awful night in a deep, deep solitude.

CHAPTER IV

THE MURDERER AND THE MURDERESS

Two hours had elapsed; and the footman lay sleeping by the side of his mistress.

Yes, soundly and undisturbedly he slept, starting not with troubled dreams, nor giving utterance to a moan expressive of remorse nor of a cry indicative of terror. It seemed as if no memory of his crime haunted or appalled him, as if no voice of blood whispered its vindictive warning in his ear, as if no pang shot through his heart. Calmly and deeply he slept, no perspiration exuding in horror from his brow, no clenching of the hands, no feverish pulsation of the heart.

But that woman who had been the accomplice in his crime and who was now his paramour, did she also sleep? Great God! what would she not have given to be enabled to sleep as that man by her side was then sleeping?

Sleep for her? No, not yet, not yet.

Tossing and turning in her place, with lightning running in her veins and the scorching heat of fever over the entire surface of her skin, now closing her eyes for a few minutes in the vain hope of wooing slumber, then opening them again and fixing them for the hundredth time upon the lamp which still burned upon the toilet-table; then again essaying to compose herself to sleep, and again opening her eyes to assure herself that the light had not gone out; now reasoning against the tremendous terrors which haunted her, now yielding to all their excruciating anguish; at one moment persuading herself that it was impossible there could be such things as ghosts, and at another flinging her startled looks around the room in dread of meeting the glazed and stony eyes of some spectre from the tomb; now experiencing the weight of a stupendous consternation on account of the

dead, dead silence which prevailed throughout the house, now springing up in the couch with a hideous terror as some unknown sound fell upon her ears; at one time looking her position coolly in the face and weighing all the chances of future detection and permanent security, at another shuddering as alarms accumulated upon her guilty soul and made her contemplate the scaffold looming in the horizon, — such were the alternations of doubt, fancied safety, reviving dread, horror, hope, and despair, through which that woman passed.

Now the galling of her conscience became poignantly intolerable, now her heart sickened at the dread of detection and disgrace, and her very life seemed shrinking from her bosom. Her memory seemed to curse her with its appalling recollections, to blast her with the lightning vividness of its thoughts, to crush her with the weight of all that filled its cells even to bursting, as the veins and vessels may become gorged with blood. Never were her ideas so harrowing; so fraught with excruciating torture. Now through her soul there seemed to gush the piercing, rending, lancinating torrent of all the aggregate calamities known to mortal experience; searing, mysterious, and horrible sensations were upon her.

Vainly did she writhe in her couch; vainly did she toss and turn, as if to free herself from some tremendous load, some monstrous oppression which sat upon her like a nightmare. Upon soul and body that awful sensation was paramount, dominating all feeling, all sense, all power, all energy. Then, in another moment, her brain would become a whirlwind, her ideas chaos, her thoughts confusion. Distraction would claim her in due turn as its prey; and thus she went on, despairing, hoping, fearing, maddening, rapid as such thoughts only can be.

'Twas a wondrous, a terrible, and a mysterious phantasmagoria that was passing through the mind of the murderess. And, O God! how scorching, withering, blasting were the lightnings of many of those images which thus shot athwart her brain!

Yes, the punishment of the murderess begins upon earth.

Now the miserable, miserable woman raised herself upon her elbow and contemplated the features of the man who slumbered by her side. Oh, how she envied him that

calm, undisturbed, and apparently dreamless slumber in which he was entranced! At that moment she would have given all she was worth, — her costly furniture, her splendid jewels, her massive plate, her elegant wardrobe, her money in the Funds, ay, all her riches, all, all, for only one sip of that Lethean cup in which the accomplice of her guilt had thus steeped his own senses. Long did she gaze upon him, upon that man whose iron soul seemed proof against the stings of conscience, and whose memory was a tranquil lake disturbed not by the corpse which its deep waters entombed.

And then into her mind stole the recollection that she had resolved to murder the man who was sleeping by her side and whom she had been compelled to receive to her arms, the man who had evinced so heartless an indifference and so brutal a callousness in demanding and exacting the pleasures of love within so short a time after the perpetration of a diabolical murder. And she conceived a horrible hatred, an intense loathing for that man whom crime had made her equal, her companion, and her bedfellow, ay, and who had already asserted the domination of a master. But though Mrs. Brace thus entertained such hostile feelings and so profound a repugnance with regard to him, she dared no longer harbour the idea of making him also a victim. No, she felt that there was enough of turpitude weighing upon her soul, — more, far more than she could contemplate with coolness, and too much for any one mortal to have to answer for.

Placing her head upon the pillow once more, she again, for the hundredth time, endeavoured to settle herself to sleep. But terrible visions continued to haunt her. Fruitlessly did she essay to turn her thoughts into other channels, — to retrospect over the past, to feast her imagination upon the pleasures of earlier days. Whichever way her mental eyes were turned, they were sure to behold a corpse at the end of the vista into which they plunged their looks.

At length she beheld a sickly and solitary gleam of dawn stealing between the curtains; and she felt that unless she closed her eyes in slumber for at least a short half-hour, she should be totally unfitted for the occupations and duties of the coming day. Rendered a coward by her guilty conscience, she was now terrified by the thought that strange

suspicions would be excited by the harassed, haggard, and care-worn aspect which she must inevitably wear if unrefreshed by sleep; and she wrestled against wakefulness with all her power. But still she slept not, still did slumber avoid her pillow.

Gradually did the day advance, making a sort of " darkness visible " in the chamber, then affording that indistinct and twilight view of things which allows the fevered imagination such dread scope for torturing the most ordinary objects into the most hideous phantom shapes, while the lamp condensed its pale rays into a small red globe of flame.

And it was now that an incipient heaviness began to weigh down the eyes of the milliner and that a vague, dreamy, but not altogether tranquil repose was stealing over her, when she fancied that there was a stir of life somewhere in the room. All in an instant did she waken up again, waken as completely up as before, while her looks were thrown in terror around the chamber. She listened, with suspended breath and upheaved bosom she listened; and again she fancied that there was a sound like the rustling of the curtains.

A cold perspiration started out from every pore; she was bathed all in a moment in her own agony. Her breath came short and gaspingly, a nervous sensation seized upon her limbs, an awful consternation struck upon her brain.

And now that rustling, at first so gentle and scarcely perceptible, was renewed; and the horrible conviction was carried to her heart, with the piercing and chilling effect of an ice-shaft, that it was not the mere work of fancy.

Some one, or some thing, was moving in the chamber. She held her breath again, she listened, in the hope of being relieved from her terrors by finding that it was her companion exhibiting some restlessness; but no, he slept on calmly and undisturbedly.

Nerving herself with all the courage she possessed, or, rather, acting upon the impulse of that desperation to which the wretched woman was goaded, she raised herself in the couch, paused to listen once more, and then, as the sounds still continued, she sent forward one fearful glance toward the window whence the strange rustling came.

But suddenly all became still, leaving the miserable Mrs. Brace unrelieved of her terrors, or, rather, a prey to a sus-

pense fraught with an equal agony, so appalling was the weight that sat upon her soul, so painful was the sickness that hung about her heart.

Suddenly her doubts were dissipated and her worst fears were confirmed; for the curtains were parted, as if by some object passing between them, and yet she saw nothing. Her hair rose crisp upon her head, and such a tightness seized upon her heart that she felt as if the moment of annihilation were at hand.

Appalled by the fearfulness of the thoughts that swept with whirlwind speed across her brain, she was unable to cry out. Petrified and actionless by the stupor of a tremendous consternation, her form was rigid as that of a statue, while her soul was tortured with the agonies of hell.

Then, as a still more terrific creeping stole along her nerves, and as she fell back on her pillow with eyes fixed and limbs rigid, as in a fearful waking trance, she became conscious beyond all possibility of doubt, that light and rapid footsteps were crossing the floor of the chamber.

She endeavoured to give vent to her terror in a loud cry, but her lips remained sealed, a mist fell upon her senses, and consciousness abandoned her.

Almost at that very instant Frederick Dray awoke, with a start; for a hideous dream had suddenly swept through his imagination.

The dawn had by this time advanced so far as to render all objects in the room tolerably clear; and throwing his looks upon Mrs. Brace, the man was instantly shocked by the impression that she was dead. But placing his hand upon her breast, he felt her heart palpitating feebly within, while her body still retained sufficient warmth to dispel the awful idea which had first struck him.

But at the same moment he was startled by a strange sound which reached his ear, and for an instant he felt a cold terror strike to his heart. He was not, however, the man to yield himself up to superstitious alarms; and, almost immediately recovering his self-possession, he listened with a breathless attention. The singular noise was continued; and it sounded like a low scratching against the door, accompanied by a subdued whining lament.

The truth flashed in a moment to the brain of the murderer, and, tearing aside the curtain, he received the con-

firmation of his thought; for there, scraping, pawing, and whining at the door, was the mongrel dog of the murdered Mobbs.

Without pausing to devote any attention to Mrs. Brace, Frederick Dray sprang from the bed and rushed toward the dog. But the beast, having an instinctive apprehension of his design, flew under the bed. The footman lifted the drapery and beheld the eyes of the animal shining with a lurid glare in the obscurity. Unhesitatingly creeping beneath the couch, he crawled on his hands and knees toward the mongrel, which now began to growl with a subdued ferocity. Still undaunted, the footman made his way nearer and nearer to the brute, with one hand now ready to grasp its throat should it attempt to fly at him. But the beast kept backing before him, until it passed from under the bed, and thus retrogressively worked its way into a corner. Then, with a courage worthy of a nobler cause, the footman fastened his iron grasp upon the dog's neck, and with both hands he held the brute as if it were in a vice.

The dog struggled desperately, but could not utter the slightest sound. The footman's fingers pressed deep into its throat; its tongue was lolling out, and it was already writhing in mortal agony, when the door of the chamber suddenly opened, and Harriet, the lady's-maid, entered the room.

Startled by this abrupt incident, Frederick Dray relaxed his hold upon the dog; and before he could recover it, the maddened brute fastened its teeth upon his naked arm, lacerating the flesh severely. A terrible string of oaths fell from the footman's lips; but the dog swept past him, rushed to the door which Harriet still held open in her hand, and sprang down the stairs. A servant was at that moment sweeping out the shop, the front door of which stood open; and thus the mongrel Toby, meeting with no further impediment, succeeded in effecting its escape from the clutches of Frederick Dray.

It would be difficult to describe the mingled astonishment, grief, and rage, which sprang into existence in Harriet's bosom when she thus burst upon a scene which afforded her unmistakable proof that her lover — or, rather, the man whom she looked upon as her lover — had passed the night with Mrs. Brace. For a few moments she remained stupefied, holding the door wide open; but when the dog shot so wildly

past her, a scream of terror burst from her lips, and the sound of anguish recalled Mrs. Brace to consciousness.

Then began a war of bitter reproaches poured forth on one side and earnest entreaties on the other, Harriet upbraiding her mistress in terms that were strong without coarseness or vulgarity, and the milliner exerting all her powers of persuasion to pacify the angry and outraged abigail, while Frederick Dray was busily employed in winding a piece of linen around his injured arm.

Ultimately the footman was compelled to interefere, for the purpose of putting an end to a scene which threatened to alarm the house; and, partly by coaxing and partly by menaces, he induced Harriet to promise her forgiveness for all that had occurred. This concession on the young woman's side was, however, accompanied with a certain sullenness and subdued discontent, which showed that she had yielded to alarm rather than to the prompting of her own inclination; and Mrs. Brace understood full well that she must in future regard her lady's-maid as a secret enemy.

CHAPTER V

THE FATE OF THE WORKING MAN'S WIFE

For four weary days did Mrs. Melmoth wander about the metropolis in search of her husband, straining her sickly babe to her withered breast, and dragging after her the three wearied, starving children, whose feet left the traces of blood upon the pavement.

Oh, miserable, miserable types of that sorrow, destitution, and wretchedness which the wealthy and tyrannical few have made the hideous heritage of the millions for centuries and centuries past, how terrible was your lot! All the woes of the plundered, the enslaved, and the persecuted of this world which a detestable oligarchy has converted into a hell, seemed to have concentrated their rage in order to vent that tremendous spite and implacable vengeance upon the heads of this devoted, doomed, outcast family.

But does not the tale come home to many a heart cankered by the galling chain of serfdom? Does not the picture strike with the force of a sledge-hammer upon the comprehension of those whose inheritance is poverty?

And if such be the effect produced, to no graphic merit on our part is the result ascribable, to no superior powers of delineation invested in us is that influence to be attributed. No; but the tale comes home thus to the heart of many, and the picture strikes thus upon the understanding of myriads, because truth is at the foundation, and the public streets and gorgeous squares of mighty cities, as well as the by-lanes and hedges and ditches in the verdant provinces, present to the eyes those wandering, famishing, squalid specimens of society's outcasts, in numbers and aspect that would be disgraceful even to a barbarian state.

O Almighty God! how long must these things last? How long are the millions to remain the slaves of the few? How

long wilt thou suffer the fruits of the earth to be monopolized by a tyrant oligarchy? Do thy thunders sleep, thou Creator of all, or hast thou abandoned the world to chance and its proceedings to the wild will of those who rule by violence, by oppressive laws, by cruelty, and by blood?

For four days did the wife of the working man drag her weary limbs through the streets and squares and alleys of this vast metropolis, seeking her husband, and vainly seeking. For four days did her children train at her heels, enduring the poignant anguish of famine, the brutality of constables, the insults of pampered flunkeys, and the frowns of the rich and great.

Stately equipages swept past, splashing them with mud, and no compassionate look was thrown upon that wretched family, no pence proffered from the hand of wealth and beauty. If they sank down, fainting and exhausted, upon the door-step of a West End palace, a hall-porter, flaming with scarlet and yellow and bedizened with gold lace, would drive them away as if they had just emerged from a lazar-house and their breath was fraught with pestilence. If they wandered forth into the suburbs with the hope of meeting a husband and a father there, a sign-board with a painted notice to the effect that " all vagrants found loitering about near those premises would be prosecuted according to law," scared them away. If they entered a churchyard and sat down to rest in the porch of the house of God, a burly beadle or a stern overseer would drive them roughly off. If they sought to enter the parks, the people's parks, those parks which belong to the nation, and consequently to all the individuals constituting this nation, if they hoped to pass the gates of these enclosures, there was a harsh voice raised to warn them off, and perhaps a cane wherewith to drive away the children. And wherefore? Because they were in rags, and your aristocratic folks who frequent those parks, lolling listlessly in their splendid carriages, cannot bear the sight of rags.

No; away with the tatterdemalion from the same atmosphere which is breathed by royalty and aristocracy; away with him or her to the House of Correction! What right have your starving, dying wretches to obtrude their squalid and half-naked forms upon the view of the gentle creatures who are clad in furs and ermine and silk and velvet?

For four days, once again do we repeat, did the miserable mother and her children wander about in search of a husband and a father. And their search was vain. They did not forget to call at their old lodging, that sorry abode whence they had been so cruelly ejected; and they inquired whether Melmoth had visited the place. The landlady responded in a sharp affirmative; and in the same breath she demanded whether Mrs. Melmoth had come to pay her the arrears of rent due. But the poor woman, heedless of the question, besought the landlady to give her the particulars of her husband's visit; and all she could learn was that he had called, five or six days previously, and was struck with consternation when he found that his family had left the house. Mrs. Melmoth likewise learned that he had wept bitterly; and that he had rushed away, in a sort of mingled frenzy and desperation, leaving no message behind him.

From time to time, during those four days of weary wanderings, Mrs. Melmoth heard vague but terrible rumours connected with the same appalling tale which had reached her ears in the low lodging-house, — how the graves of the dead had been violated and the corpses exhumed for the frightful but mysterious and incomprehensible purpose of mutilation. And these hideous narratives filled her with a horror that made the blood curdle in her veins and the pulsations of her heart stand still.

It was on the fifth morning of those fruitless wanderings that the unhappy family was traversing a fashionable street at the West End of London, when Mrs. Melmoth was suddenly seized with so severe an illness that she sank down upon the steps leading to the front door of a lordly mansion. A mortal terror came over the poor creature, a terror accompanying the sensation of approaching death; for the reflection, the harrowing reflection, flashed to her mind, "What was to become of that poor sickly babe and the other children, if she were to be called away from them?"

Oh, the dire anguish, the ineffable misery, the acutely rending grief which a parent experiences when her soul's secret voice within asks this tremendous question!

And that anguish, that misery, that grief were now felt by Mrs. Melmoth, as she sank down on the door-step. The three eldest children were clinging around her in a moment, when the door suddenly opened and a stout domestic, ap-

parelled in a gorgeous livery, commanded them all to rise and depart, or he should be forced to send for the constable.

But the poor children were heedless of his voice; for they were absorbed in the dread spectacle presented by their mother, who now fell back on the steps. The eldest boy took the babe from her arms and gave it to his sister to hold. Then, with tears streaming down his cheeks, he bent over his dying parent, exclaiming, in a voice of intensest anguish, " Oh, look up, dear mother, look up, I beseech you! Say but one word, tell me that you are not very, very ill, that you will soon be better — Oh, do tell me that! "

But the poor creature was unable to speak; and as she raised herself up with immense difficulty and fixed her glazing eyes upon her children, an expression of indescribable anguish passed over her countenance. For in that supreme moment of her mortal existence, while the spirit hovered between two worlds, and the last breath fluttered upon her ashy lips, and life was about to flit away for ever, she seemed to feel with the most poignant anguish the dread condition in which her friendless, almost orphan offspring would be left behind her.

And, O God! who can describe the look, the last look, which she fixed upon her children, — a look so full of mingled fondness and despair, so fraught with deepest, holiest love, combined with an awful agony of doubt and fear, that no language could convey all its meaning nor delineate its intensity?

And around her were those weeping children, the eldest of whom alone understood that his mother was dying, and the others weeping so bitterly because they thought that she was ill and because they beheld their brother weep likewise.

And still upon the threshold of the door stood the pompous servant, commanding them to depart, menacing them with the constable, and bidding them observe that he was too shrewd to be taken in by what he denominated " the sham illness " of the woman.

Some persons were soon attracted to the spot, and it was then discovered that the poor creature was really dying. Alarmed at this announcement, not because he pitied that perishing mother surrounded by her offspring, but because he was frightened lest the corpse should be brought into the

house, and he had a horror of the dead, especially a dead pauper, the stout footman banged the door violently and hastened down to the servants' hall to relate to the other domestics all that was occurring.

And there, upon the cold stone steps, at the rich lord's door, the homeless, famished, vagrant wife of the English working man gave up the ghost; and while her children were borne away to the workhouse by the beadle of the parish, the lifeless mother was laid out upon a stretcher and carried to the dead ward of the same establishment, to be interred as soon as the contracting undertaker had time to knock up together a few thin deal boards constituting the pauper's coffin.

CHAPTER VI

THE PRINCESS AND HER LOVER

RETURN we now to that secluded dwelling in the environs of Windsor where Sir Richard Stamford had fixed his abode.

It was evening; the curtains in the parlour were drawn, the fire burned cheerfully in the grate, the lamp shone upon the table, and the atmosphere was warm, and likewise perfumed with the odour of some early flowers reared in a hot-house. These were doubtless the present of some lady of rank and wealth; and, indeed, the fair donor was now seated upon the sofa by the side of the baronet.

Is it necessary to inform our readers that Sir Richard's companion was the Princess Amelia?

Yes, in a comparatively humble attire, the royal lady was gracing that room with her divine presence. But let us not be mistaken: we do not speak fulsomely of her as the daughter of a king, for ours is the last pen on the face of the earth that would record anything adulatory of rank for mere rank's sake alone. No, it was not because she was a princess that we depict her as embellishing that chamber; but it is as a woman, a charming, amiable, and generous-hearted woman, that we now regard her.

And as she sat by the side of Sir Richard Stamford, with one fair hand locked in his own, she gazed upon him with looks full of tenderness, full of love, full of profound and impassioned affection; and the heightening colour of her damask cheeks and the deepening scarlet of her plump and juicy mouth, combined with the gentle heaving of her bosom, indicated the soft desires that were animating her soul. For that was the age of low gowns and transparent dresses; and more than half of the royal lady's voluptuous breast was revealed to view when her scarf was laid aside. Thus the

swelling and falling of those luxuriant globes of snow were plainly visible; and as the baronet felt the warm pressure of Amelia's hand and beheld her glowing bust, when, too, he saw the tint of the rose deepening into that of the carnation upon her cheeks, and her fine blue eyes becoming more melting and tender in expression, he would have been something more or something less than man had he not caught the effluence of that desire and the spirit of that sensual longing which exhaled, as it were, from the beauteous person of the royal maiden.

With rapture, oh, with ineffable rapture, did he gaze upon this young, lovely, and confiding creature who had given him her heart and was now prepared to give him her virtue; and as his eyes wandered slowly over her heavenly countenance and her form so rich in all its virginal contours, he could scarcely believe that this radiant being, so full of vigorous youthfulness and with such a grand destiny in the perspective if she chose to pursue it, he could scarcely settle his mind, we say, to believe that she was really his, and his only.

And truly, truly, the Princess Amelia was a charming creature. Arrayed in the simple vesture which she had purposely assumed to escape observation when visiting her lover, she possessed an air of amiability which could not fail to win the heart independently of the power exercised by her personal loveliness. And this loveliness was of no common order; indeed it has been already described in an earlier chapter, but never, perhaps, did it appear to greater effect than on the present occasion. For the royal maiden wore a dark dress, which set off her light, shining hair and her alabaster skin to the utmost advantage. Her beauteous hand and delicate wrist, with their tracery of blue veins, were thrown into admirable relief by the dark sleeves that covered the robust yet well-modelled arm; and above the low and sloping corsage of her dress the well-rounded bosoms rose in all their luxuriant grandeur and their stainless purity. The dazzling fairness of her skin was such that it shone through the black silk hose of delicate texture which marked the shape of the well-turned ankle; and the ribbon turning around it served to display its elegance of proportion all the more advantageously.

There was an air of ardent languor in her whole appear-

ance; and her person, her looks, her smile, all breathed a refined voluptuousness which was well calculated to ravish the heart and pour floods of ecstasy into the soul of her lover. Around this charming creature did a perfume of love seem to float, intoxicating the senses of him who was thus basking in the warm and mellowed sunshine of her looks and smiles; and with the soft enthusiasm of holy love that he felt for her in one sense was mingled the more earthly longing transfused from her own glowing temperament.

" Beloved Amelia," he said, in a soft, low tone, " you have asked me if I am happy now, and I can truthfully reply that my felicity is complete. Ten days have now elapsed since you permitted me to declare that I love you; and on that occasion — oh, how memorable was the hour! — you confessed to a kindred feeling. And during those ten days, not one has elapsed without bringing you hither to irradiate the gloom of my solitude. Ought I not therefore to be happy? Ought I not to forget the past, and think only of the present and the future? "

" Yes, ten days have elapsed, Richard," murmured the princess, burying her blushing countenance upon her lover's breast as she spoke, " since I threw myself into your arms and declared that I was henceforth your wife, and that you must consider yourself my husband. Yes, upon that occasion I vowed to love you as the being most dear to me in the whole world, dearer than parents, brothers, and sisters, dearer than all that wealth and rank can bestow."

" And you have not repented of this promise, my Amelia? " said the baronet, passing his arm gently around her waist.

" No, oh, no, I never shall repent," she murmured, her whole form vibrating to his fond pressure; and throwing her head back in a soft, sensuous languor, she regarded the ceiling as if in deep communing with herself.

And as that charming head was supported by the back of the sofa, the attitude which her person thus took was one of such complete abandonment that her lover had never known her to yield to before, an abandonment which profiled all the undulating lines of her full but symmetrical form. There was something irresistibly inviting, something overpoweringly ravishing in this attitude; and as the eyes of the baronet swept over the beauteous features which were thus outlined and the flowing developments of her person which

were thus thrown forth, he felt that he could die on behalf of one in whom so many graces and such marvellous attractions were concentrated.

"Yes," she resumed, her eyes half-closing, and her bosom heaving with a profound sigh of pleasure, "I am thine, Richard, unalterably thine. But still meseems that you cannot altogether forget that difference in our social stations which the accident of birth has established; still must I complain that all the advances of love's tenderness have to emanate from me. Oh, why will you not treat me as an equal? Why will you not look upon me as your wife in reality as much as by virtue of the promise which I have made? Yet do I thank you, oh, sincerely thank you, Richard, for all the delicacy of your conduct toward me; but at the same time I am anxious that you should forget me as a princess, and know me, love me, treat me only as a wife."

"Dearest, dearest Amelia," exclaimed the baronet, his whole form trembling with an unknown and ineffable joy, as he pressed her more closely to his heart and felt her glowing bosom palpitate profoundly beneath his hand as his arm encircled her waist, "what would you have me understand?"

"That I am thine, thine altogether, my well-beloved," she answered, in a tone of exultation and impassioned fervour; and throwing herself completely into his arms, she whispered, in the broken and faltering voice that indicated emotions deeply stirred and desires profoundly excited, "Think me not the less worthy of all thy love because no priest's blessing may be bestowed upon our union; but remember that thou mayst wed me in the sight of Heaven, if not in that of the world, and that the bond which thus unites us becomes as indissoluble as if it were riveted by all the holiest ceremonies of the Church."

"And dost thou not tremble for the consequences, my well-beloved Amelia?" asked the baronet, in a low and tremulous voice, as he strained to his breast that luxuriant but symmetrical form which was endowed with all the supple and elastic grace of an amorous bayadere when smothering her lover with devouring caresses.

"Those who love fondly, wildly, madly, passionately," murmured the princess, "pause not to ponder upon consequences. The present absorbs their souls; the past is forgotten, the future is unheeded, and therefore undreaded.

Such is my case, Richard; for I love thee fondly, wildly, madly, passionately."

And as the royal lady thus spoke, she raised her head from his shoulder where it had reposed; and, gazing upon him with her blushing, burning countenance, she looked into the depths of his eyes with an ardour that transfused its flames into his own soul.

"Dearest, dearest Amelia," he murmured; "what a glorious view of heaven has this love of thine opened to my comprehension!"

And then they gazed upon each other for a long time in silence; but love, even when it is mute, speaks with a thousand eloquent tongues, and the soul has an ear which catches all the delicious outpourings of those secret and mysterious voices. Oh, these are moments of ineffable bliss and surpassing ecstasy, when the very life appears to be melting in mingled joy and voluptuous languor, and when the impassioned looks that thus meet and thus convey vows more fervid than language could frame, unite in bliss and lose themselves for a long time in each other.

Yes, love has its intoxicating pleasures and its delirium of happiness; and the Princess Amelia now experienced all the glowing rapture and the Elysian joyousness which fill the youthful heart when it feels another beating against its own. And, carried away by the ardent longings which were devouring her, she pressed her lips to those of her lover; while he felt her entire form vibrating in his arms and her bosom palpitating like the long swell of the ocean after the whirlwind has swept over it. Her eyes, half-closing, still looked love and fondness and desire from beneath their long lashes, inundating him, as it were, with ecstatic raptures and bathing him in a warm flood of heavenly bliss. Transports glided from one soul into the other by the mysterious mesmerism of that delicious contact of their forms and those transfusing looks of mingled tenderness and fervid passion. All their thoughts and all their senses were absorbed in the enjoyment of the blissful present; the past was indeed forgotten, the future as utterly disregarded, and the royal lady abandoned her virtue to her lover as unresistingly and as confidingly as she had already bestowed her heart.

CHAPTER VII

FLORIMEL AND THE PAGE

THREE days had elapsed since the removal of Pauline Clarendon and her sister to their old residence in the Edgeware Road; and in the meantime Lord Florimel had received the letter which the young maiden had written to him, and to which allusion was made in a recent chapter.

It was evening; and the nobleman was seated in one of the parlours of his splendid mansion in Piccadilly, pondering in a deeply mournful reverie upon the sudden, and to him unaccountable, estrangement of Pauline's affections. For, being totally ignorant of all the adventures which had occurred at the masquerade, little suspecting that Lord Montgomery had personated him upon that occasion, or that Pauline had been made the dupe of the circumstances attendant on such a proceeding on the earl's part, the unhappy Florimel knew not into what channel to turn his conjectures in order to seek out a reason and a motive for the conduct of the beauteous being whom he loved so tenderly.

For the hundredth time since he had received the mysterious letter did he now take it from his pocketbook and reperuse the contents, which ran as follows:

"Everything is at an end between us. I need not inflict upon myself the torture of expatiating on the motives which prompt this decision. Your own good sense cannot fail to give you the assurance that I have no alternative but the adoption of this resolution. And the decision to which I have come is unalterable. I have withdrawn myself from the world, and shall henceforth devote all my care, all my thoughts, and all my attentions to my afflicted sister. It will be useless for you to attempt to discover my abode: but even

if some accident should possibly make you acquainted with it, it were still more useless for you to ask an interview. In a word, I command your lordship to abstain from molesting me in any way. I entreat you to think of me no more. Dead to the world, dead to you, dead to the heart's best and purest affections, I exist only as a ministering friend and companion for my poor sister. Farewell, then, for ever.

"PAULINE."

The reader can fully comprehend how well calculated this note was to plunge the unhappy Florimel into the deepest perplexity and the profoundest sorrow. He remembered the former misunderstanding which was produced by the letter sent him by Mrs. Brace through the agency of Rose Foster, and he doubted not that some new error had arisen to inspire Pauline with a jealous animosity toward him. But he could not, for the life of him, settle his ideas upon any recent phase in his conduct which could have possibly become liable to any misconception. He had in reality proved fully faithful to all the pledges made by him to Pauline; and the reader has seen how firmly and prudently, how resolutely and cheerfully he resisted the overtures made to him by the unknown lady who sent the masquerade-ticket and the blue domino. In a word, he had not been guilty of a single weakness wherewith he might reproach himself since he had given Pauline such solemn pledges of fidelity and reformation; nor was he able to call to mind any incident which could possibly be misconstrued or lay him open to suspicion. His bewilderment was therefore equal to his sorrow.

Upon receiving the letter in the first instance, he had set off post-haste to the Duke of Devonshire's villa near Aylesbury, with the feeble hope of obtaining some clue to Pauline's new residence. But in this endeavour he utterly failed; the servants at that establishment declined or were unable to answer his queries. In a state of mind bordering upon distraction he had returned to London; and, proceeding without a moment's delay to Devonshire House, he obtained an interview with the duchess. Her Grace affected complete ignorance of Pauline's abode; and although she was melted even to tears by the mingled passion and pathos with which her noble young cousin proclaimed his innocence of any action calculated to wound the feelings or the dignity

of Pauline, she nevertheless was not convinced by his pleading. On the contrary, she judged him entirely by his antecedents; and thus, while she pitied him deeply, she looked upon his present sorrow merely in the light of contrition and not as a sentiment so closely allied with innocence as it really was. Moreover, as he made not the slightest allusion to the masquerade, she herself did not touch upon it; and even when he implored her to explain to him the motives of Pauline's conduct, if she herself happened to be acquainted with them, she evaded the subject as well as she was able, under the impression that he was hypocritically affecting ignorance on that head, because, if charged with being at the masquerade, he was prepared to deny the accusation. Thus, believing her cousin to be acting with duplicity in one sense though inspired with a sincere contrition in another, but well aware that Pauline would not be prepared, at least in her present state of feeling, to accept the latter as an expiation for the former, the duchess avoided any explanatory comment and preferred playing the part of a listener. She likewise thought that some degree of punishment would aid in the effectual reformation of her cousin; and though she herself was far from being imbued with really virtuous principles, yet as a woman she could enter sympathetically into the feelings of her friend Pauline under the outrage which she firmly believed the maiden to have sustained at Florimel's hands.

Thus was it that the young nobleman retired from Devonshire House as much in the dark as ever, not only with regard to Pauline's new place of abode, but likewise in respect to the motives which had instigated her conduct toward him.

During the three days which had elapsed since he received the letter, Florimel had wandered on horseback amidst all the outskirts of the metropolis, gazing intently up at the windows of all such neat little dwellings as he fancied to be of the kind which Pauline was likely to select for her seclusion; but it never once occurred to him that she could possibly have gone back to that selfsame villa where he had first formed her acquaintance. His search was therefore utterly fruitless; and we now find him seated in one of the apartments of his elegant mansion, plunged into a deep despondency and losing himself in vain conjectures relative to the misunderstanding which had occurred.

While he was thus absorbed in his mournful reflections, the door was opened gently, and Rao, the black page, appeared upon the threshold. But the nobleman observed him not; and the sable youth, gliding noiselessly into the room, stopped at a short distance from his master, whom he contemplated with the most steadfast earnestness.

Florimel was gazing upon the fire with a listless vacancy, and the flames thereof, as well as the lustre of the wax candles burning upon the mantelpiece, lighted his countenance with that Rembrandt effect which threw out one side of his face into strong relief. The page was thus enabled to observe the expression of deep despair which the young nobleman's features wore, and an undefinable smile of mingled malignity, joy, triumph, and hatred glided over the lips of the sable boy.

At length, fearing that he should be noticed while thus contemplating his master, Rao advanced into his presence.

" Well, what has brought you hither? " demanded Florimel, somewhat sharply, for he was annoyed at being thus disturbed in the midst of his reflections.

" Your lordship has issued no orders respecting the dinner hour," replied Rao, in his soft and subdued tone, " and it is now six o'clock. Will your lordship be pleased to have dinner served up at once? "

" Not immediately, Rao," replied the nobleman, in a kinder tone. " I have not the slightest appetite. I will ring when I wish dinner to be served up."

" May I most respectfully ask if your lordship feels indisposed? " said the boy, the glitter of malignity for an instant flashing in his eyes as he put the question.

" No — yes — that is, somewhat," responded Florimel; then, raising his head and looking up into the youth's countenance, he said, " But wherefore do you ask, Rao? "

" Because I eat your lordship's bread," was the immediate though hypocritical reply; " and it would grieve me to the soul to learn that your lordship was either ill or unhappy."

" Unhappy! " echoed Florimel; " what makes you think that I am unhappy? "

" Perhaps your lordship is already angry with me for venturing the remark which has just fallen from my lips,"

said Rao, in a tone of deep mournfulness and with a humble diffidence of manner.

"No, far from it," exclaimed Florimel, who was in one of those humours when sympathy is welcomed as a solace, come from whatever quarter it may. "I am desirous to deserve and retain the good feeling of all my dependents. Speak, then, freely, and tell me wherefore you fancy that I am unhappy."

"Because your lordship's altered manner and changed appearance tell the mournful tale," said Rao, throwing into his looks and voice an expression of profound melancholy; "and also because I myself am too much accustomed to gaze upon the countenance of the unhappy not to know when the shade which sits upon the heart darkens the features likewise."

"Ah! is it possible that you are acquainted with sorrow, you, who are so young?" exclaimed Florimel, forgetting his own griefs for the moment in the interest excited by the observation of the youthful page.

"I am acquainted with sorrow, my lord," was the reply, "because I have been tortured to the soul in witnessing its ravages upon the heart of one who is near and dear to me. Personally I am uninjured by the blow which has stricken her; but, sympathetically, I am afflicted, profoundly afflicted."

"Ah! then it was some one whom you loved?" cried Florimel. "And yet you are a mere boy."

"It was my sister," said Rao, in a low, deep tone.

"Your sister!" repeated Florimel. "Then you have a sister still living? Methought, from what you told me when first I received you into my service, that you were without relatives or friends in the whole wide world?"

"I informed your lordship that I was an orphan and friendless," replied the boy, a tear, a gilded tear, wherein was reflected the light of a perturbed spirit, trickling down his cheek; but, instantaneously dashing it away, he said, "Yes, I am an orphan, and I was friendless until you received me into your service. Had I not been deprived of my parents, that tremendous misfortune would never have occurred," he added, his manner indicating that he was now preoccupied with an unquiet thought.

"To what misfortune do you allude?" asked Florimel

in a kind tone, at the same instant casting upon him a look of sympathy and encouragement as one extends a hand to a suffering friend.

" Oh, to what misfortune do I allude? " echoed Rao, with a singular expression of the countenance and a strange accent of the voice, while over his lips there swept a smile which might either have been taken as indicative of the bitterness of newly awakened grief or for the malignity of sarcasm. Then, having uttered those words in obedience to the sudden impulse which prompted him, he seemed to return to himself, and said, " I was speaking of the misfortune which overtook my poor sister."

" And that misfortune? " exclaimed Florimel, interrogatively.

" I should rather have described it as the foul wrong that was done her, my lord," Rao hastened to observe.

" Where is your sister now? " inquired the nobleman.

" In the far-off land of our birth, my lord," was the response.

" And is she well provided for? Is she above want? " demanded Florimel, hastily, for the generous feelings of his heart were now deeply touched.

" She is fortunate in those respects, my lord," answered Rao; " but her heart is a wreck, one sentiment alone inspiring it now."

" And that sentiment? " said Gabriel.

" Is vengeance! " replied the sable boy, with a singular vehemence of tone and manner, almost amounting to significancy.

" Then her wrongs are deep? " observed Florimel, his interest gradually becoming enchained in this conversation.

" Her wrongs are the foulest and the most fiendlike which a man can possibly heap upon the devoted head of a woman," returned the boy, his voice expressing a profound concentration of bitter feelings. " She loved one who deceived her, who led her to believe that she should become his wife, notwithstanding the disparity of their social rank, and who took an infernal advantage of the implicit faith and the blind confidence which that artless, unsuspecting girl placed in his honour and his love. Oh, there are seductions, my lord, the iniquity of which is deepened by circumstances to the blackest dye, and this is one of them."

"I understand you, Rao," said the nobleman, a visible trouble coming over him as his own recollections reminded him that he was not altogether exempt from the liability to be similarly accused. "But proceed; you interest me. Who was this seducer of your sister?"

"An Englishman, my lord; a native of your own land," replied the sable youth. "Gloriously handsome was he, as sublimely beautiful was my sister; but while her heart was full of tenderness and truth, his was fraught only with deceit and perfidy. He abandoned her, shamefully abandoned her, when he learned that she was in a way to become a mother; and their child was born in secrecy and in sin."

"And did the child survive?" asked Florimel, his tone made tremulous by the tide of recollections that were still flowing in unto his own soul.

"The child perished at its birth," continued Rao; "but the memory of my sister's shame and wrongs perished not with it. No, this memory survives, and it is immortal. I swore to avenge the injury wrought against my sister; and for this purpose I bade my native land farewell, perhaps for ever."

"Then you are aware that your sister's seducer is in England?" said Florimel, in a tone of inquiry.

"Yes, and I know also that he is in London," answered the sable youth. "I have seen him."

"Beware, my young friend, how you seek to vent your anger upon him, whoever he may be," said the nobleman. "Remember that there are laws to punish any injury or outrage done by one toward another; and that your sister's wrongs will be deemed but a small extenuation for any deed of vindictiveness or sudden passion into which you may be hurried."

"I have well weighed all this, my lord," said Rao, in a mild but firm tone.

"And you have taken, I hope, a prudent view of the matter," continued Florimel. "For I feel interested in you, and I should be sorry to see you come to harm. But I suppose I may not ask you the name of your sister's seducer?"

"My lord, that is a secret which I dare not reveal," was the earnest but respectful reply.

"No, I will not seek to penetrate further into your confidence than you may choose to admit me," exclaimed the

nobleman. "At the same time, circumstances not only permit, but likewise enjoin me to proffer you my counsel in this matter. In the first place, I feel well disposed toward you; and therefore I have some claim upon your attention. Secondly, I am your master; and therefore you are bound to give me your ear willingly. Thirdly, you are a stranger in these realms; and hence it becomes my duty to warn you away from the path of danger. Remember, likewise, that when you first presented yourself to me and implored me to take you into my service to save you from the misery and destitution which threatened you in a land where you found yourself a friendless foreigner, remember, I say, that I took compassion upon you and at once received you into my household. You gave me no references, showed me no testimonials, but I took your word for all you told me. This I did cheerfully, willingly, readily; because I felt persuaded that you were not deceiving me. But if you knew the English character well, you would learn to appreciate all the more deeply this action on my part; for you might have knocked at a thousand doors without receiving so much as a word of kindness, much less an asylum within. I do not remind you of all this to glorify myself; but simply to appeal to your sense of gratitude and induce you to follow the advice which good feeling and duty alike prompt me to offer. This advice is that you will renounce all thoughts of avenging yourself upon a man who has no doubt wronged your sister grievously; for the violence of that vengeance would only redound upon your own head."

"I thank your lordship for this well-meant counsel," said Rao, averting his head and speaking in a voice tremulous with emotion.

"And you will follow it?" exclaimed Florimel.

"I will think over it, my lord," was the response, delivered with a tone and manner so suddenly altered that Florimel was uncertain whether he had really made a lasting impression upon the boy's mind or not.

"Could not some reparation be made to your sister?" inquired the nobleman. "Perhaps, if you were to call upon the individual who has wronged her, he might concede that atonement which lies in his power and which would place her in an independent position for the remainder of her days."

"Ah! your lordship alludes to the recompense of money," said Rao, in a tone of withering scorn and with an unmistakable sneer of bitterness upon his sable countenance. "Yes, I am aware that the Englishman fancies that every wrong and every injury may be expiated by means of gold. I am aware that the same panacea which the law suggests for a broken head is believed to be a sovereign anodyne also for a breaking heart. Pardon me, my lord, if I make these observations with a bitterness which it ill becomes a dependent to display in the presence of his master; but you have deigned to inquire into my domestic secrets and my sister's wrongs, and you will not be offended if I give free vent to all the ideas which this discourse has engendered in my mind. Know, then, my lord, that my sister cherishes those lofty notions and clings to those sublime feelings which lead her to regard her lost virtue as something which no price can atone for. She would sooner perish of utter misery than receive a pecuniary recompense for the happiness, the honour, and the self-respect which have been destroyed by a villain. No, my lord, there is but one atonement which the seducer can make, and that he never intended to accomplish even from the first."

"Your sister must be beautiful, Rao, if she be like you," said Florimel, scarcely able to repress a smile at the thoughts which the boy's last words had conjured up and to which he was now giving expression as delicately as he could, so as not to wound the feelings of his page; "but your own good sense must make you aware that an alliance between an Englishman of rank and one of the dark-skinned houris of the East would subject not only the bridegroom, but likewise the bride, to much that is disagreeable in this country."

"Yes, my lord, I am well aware that the conventional rules of English civilization," said Rao, with continued bitterness, "revolt against what are called unequal marriages. But the seducer should have thought of all this when he wooed my sister and when he won her upon the faith of his solemn pledges. He should have well weighed all the obstacles which circumstances might present to their union, ere he coldly, basely, and deliberately plundered her of the only jewel which she possessed. For was it not cruel, my lord, was it not atrocious, was it not fiendlike for

that man to introduce himself into the sanctuary of a young and confiding heart, merely to make a ruin of that temple and despoil that sacred shrine? Wherefore did he fasten the talons of his infamy upon that young bosom which beat only with devotion and love for him, wherefore did he swoop like the ravenous vulture upon that innocent lamb which had neither the inclination nor the power to injure him, and why did he spread his toils to ensnare that harmless, timid, bashful dove which suspected not the agreeable disguise that the treacherous fowler knew so well how to assume? Oh, my lord, put yourself in my place, fancy, for an instant, that it was your sister who had thus been wronged, thus injured, thus outraged, and tell me, my lord, how you would act. What course would you adopt toward the vile seducer?"

While thus speaking with an impassioned vehemence, the singular and enthusiastic boy fixed upon Lord Florimel a look in which so strange an expression shone that the nobleman was troubled. A sensation of uneasiness stole over him; for there was not wanting an incident in his own life the memory of which reminded him how deservedly and how justly the bitter, inveterate, and poignant reproaches which he now heard levelled against another seducer might be addressed to himself. Then that appeal to his own feelings, his own heart, that home-thrust question how he would act if his sister were wronged by a villain, oh, all this was wormwood and gall to him; and therefore was he troubled in spirit as those words fell upon his ears, and as he encountered the strange looks which the boy fixed on him.

Florimel averted his eyes, he held down his head; for conscience made him ashamed; and then an imperceptible smile of ferocious hate and savage triumph wavered for a moment upon Rao's lips.

"What would your lordship do in the case I have named?" he inquired, after a minute's pause, during which the nobleman had remained buried in a profound reverie.

"Why do you thus put the question so pointedly to me, boy?" demanded Gabriel, raising his head again.

"Because your lordship has given me such excellent advice," was the prompt answer, "that I feel convinced your lordship is a man of stern rectitude, lofty notions, unimpeachable honour, and generous sentiments."

As these words flowed from the lips of the sable page, the young nobleman's trouble increased visibly. They applied, syllable for syllable, to a certain incident in his own life, an incident which Rao's narrative brought with startling vividness back to Florimel's mind; and there were even moments during the impassioned outpourings of the youth's tongue when the nobleman fancied that the tale, the reproaches, the bitterness, the infernal hatred, were all meant to be applied to himself. But when he again looked up into the boy's countenance, and beheld the deep melancholy which his features had now reassumed, when, too, he reflected how impossible it was that the one incident just referred to could possibly be known to the sable page, and that even if it were the youth could have no possible interest of a personal nature in it, he felt assured that this was only one of those coincidences which occasionally happen in the lives of men, and which make the reproaches they hear levelled against others come bitterly home to themselves.

"You must remember, Rao," he said, evasively, "that there are certain peccadillos which are looked very lightly upon in this country, and the seduction of a girl is not deemed a crime."

"Peccadillos, my lord!" exclaimed the youth, in a tone of indignation. "What, is it a trivial offence, a venial error, perhaps only an amiable weakness, to plunder an innocent, devoted, and trusting female of the jewel which she possesses? Is it no disgrace to turn the brightness of honour into the darkness of shame? Is it no sin to change virtue into vice? If honour is something to be esteemed and admired, then he who tarnishes it is assuredly a villain; and if vice is something to be loathed, then the man who teaches a woman to enter the path of vice is assuredly a criminal of the blackest dye himself. It may be convenient, my lord, in this land of consummate civilization," added Rao, with withering scorn and penetrating bitterness, "it may be convenient for the wealthy profligate and the nobly born voluptuary to paint seduction in the mildest colours; but in the estimation of all truly honourable and really reflecting men it must ever be ranked in the catalogue of the most heinous offences. What, to tear down a woman from the pinnacle of her purity, to poison the pure spring of her young heart's gushing affections, to render her an object of contempt

and loathing in the eyes of the world, to annihilate her happiness at the same time with her innocence, — is all this no crime, my lord? Ah! I am certain, very certain that you would not like to have the weight of so foul a deed upon your conscience," added the sable youth, fixing his dark eyes penetratingly upon the nobleman.

And Florimel's cheeks burned, and his lips quivered, and his whole frame trembled, as these words smote upon his brain like the scorching breath of a pestilence; and he fell into a confused and chaotic wondering whether the youth were really levelling those barbed arrows at his heart, or whether they only struck into its core at random. But again persuading himself that it was his own guilty conscience which thus self-appropriated the boy's remarks, he threw off the sense of confusion, shame, and annoyance which had seized upon him; and he was just on the point of making some observation in order to put an end to a discourse so little palatable, when a loud double knock at the front door resounded through the mansion.

Rao bit his lip with a sudden paroxysm of spite and vexation at having the interview with his master thus interrupted; then, gliding from the room, he returned at the expiration of a couple of minutes, ushering in Mr. Cresswell, Lord Florimel's solicitor.

CHAPTER VIII

MENACING PROSPECTS

THE professional adviser of Lord Florimel presented a striking contrast with Mr. Rigden, the attorney to Earl Montgomery. For inasmuch as the latter was cold, wary, suspicious, and keen in every sense of the word, the former was bustling, active, frank, and generous. Not that he possessed one atom less legal ability than the other, but he was a man who studied to deal honourably alike with clients and adversaries, and he would have scorned the petty chicanery and devious proceedings to which Mr. Rigden unhesitatingly had recourse when it was worth his while to put such illegitimate mode of action into requisition.

In person Mr. Cresswell was short, thin, and pale-faced; his features, though sharp, wore an expression of mingled good humour and intelligence; and his conversation as well as his manner denoted the frankness of an honest man.

After the usual salutations were exchanged between the nobleman and his attorney, and the latter had taken a seat in compliance with the former's invitation, the object of this professional visit was explained.

"I am truly sorry to be the bearer of evil tidings to your lordship," said Mr. Cresswell; "but my duty prompted me to lose no time in calling to acquaint your lordship with something unpleasant that has occurred."

"I cannot conceive how anything of a disagreeable nature can possibly occur with regard to my affairs," observed Lord Florimel, surveying his solicitor with astonishment; "but pray explain yourself."

"I have just received a letter, my lord," resumed the man of business, "from an attorney named Rigden, stating that inasmuch as he is aware of my having the honour to be your

lordship's professional adviser, he wishes to know whether I will receive service of the necessary process in the commencement of a suit which, it appears, he is instructed to open against your lordship."

"A suit against me!" exclaimed Florimel. "And for what purpose? On what ground?"

"A claimant has started in respect to your lordship's estates and the peerage which your lordship enjoys," replied Mr. Cresswell.

"But this is ridiculous!" ejaculated the young nobleman. "Who is the claimant, and what are the pretences set forth?"

"The claimant, my lord," answered Cresswell, "is a certain Mr. Woodfall — George Woodfall."

"Ah! Woodfall!" cried Florimel, struck with a sudden reminiscence and likewise with a feeling of alarm. "I remember to have read certain proceedings which were instituted by a Mr. Woodfall, some fifty or sixty years ago, against my grandfather, respecting the peerage and estates which were then held by my ancestor and which have descended to me. But when the affair came to be properly argued before the House of Lords, it was given against that Mr. Woodfall in the most unequivocal manner. I presume, however, that the present claimant who has thus suddenly sprung up is a descendant of that same Mr. Woodfall of whom I have just spoken."

"No doubt of it, my lord," said Mr. Cresswell. "But at present I am altogether in the dark as to the grounds of his claims, Mr. Rigden having merely written me the formal letter usual in the initiative of such cases."

"And of course you have undertaken to receive the process on my behalf?" observed Florimel, inquiringly.

"I instantaneously returned to Mr. Rigden an answer to that effect," said the attorney.

"The whole affair lies in a nutshell and will be easily settled by the production of certain deeds in my possession," continued Florimel. "In fact, the point, so far as I remember it, may be thus explained: My great-grandfather, when somewhat advanced in years, became enamoured of a young female of humble birth but great beauty. He was a widower and childless. Emma Woodfall, the young person in question, became his mistress in the first instance and subsequently his wife. Two sons were the issue of that connection:

and it has been very satisfactorily ascertained that the marriage did not take place until after the birth of the elder son. Consequently he was illegitimate, and could not possibly have claimed the peerage, under any circumstances, nor the estates except under the provisions of his father's will. No will in his favour was ever made; at least, none has ever been produced. He married early, had issue, and died before his father. From him are the Woodfalls descended; whereas the branch to which I belong is that of the younger son. This younger son was unquestionably born in wedlock; and consequently his posterity have enjoyed the honours and estates of the house of Florimel. When the affair came before the House of Lords fifty years ago, it was the heir of the elder brother disputing the title and right of the younger brother himself. The point alleged was that the marriage between the old lord and Emma Woodfall had taken place a few days before, and not some weeks after, the birth of the elder son. But the evidence was by no means conclusive; on the contrary, it was shown to the satisfaction of the House of Lords that the elder son was not born in wedlock. Notwithstanding the decision of their lordships confirming my grandfather in the possession of the peerage of Florimel, the suit still went on in Chancery respecting the estates; but an amicable arrangement at length took place, in virtue of which the Woodfall family, that is to say, the heirs of the elder brother so often alluded to, received a certain sum of money and resigned all future claims to the property. This compact was effected by a document duly drawn up, and which document is amongst the title-deeds and other family papers now in my possession. You thus comprehend the whole transaction; and you may likewise form a tolerably accurate notion of the nature of those claims which the present Mr. Woodfall is likely to advance."

"I understand the matter thoroughly, my lord," observed Mr. Cresswell. "It is very fortunate that you are in possession of the document to which you have alluded; because the claim to the peerage and that to the estates are in some sense very distinct. You have the decision of the House of Lords to advance against the former; while the deed of compact is a complete answer to the latter. Does your lordship know anything of this George Woodfall?"

"Only that he is an artist," replied Florimel. "His

father was a dissolute man, who lavished a large fortune with the most wanton extravagance; and the two branches of the family have been for years estranged from each other. I mean that the branch to which I belong and that of the Woodfalls have held no communion for many years past. The breach took place before I was born; and therefore I cannot be accused of any neglect toward this George Woodfall, inasmuch as he never applied to me for succour or assistance. At all events, his claims are utterly unfounded, and perhaps the better course for you to adopt, Mr. Cresswell, would be to call on Mr. Rigden, explain the whole matter to him, show him the deed of compact, and satisfy him at once that his client has not the faintest ground for a lawsuit."

"The plan suggested by your lordship shall be duly carried into effect," said Mr. Cresswell. "You had better give me all the documents at once, and I will look over them this evening, in order to be well prepared to see Mr. Rigden to-morrow."

"I will fetch you the papers immediately," observed Lord Florimel.

With these words, the young nobleman quitted the room; and as he passed through the hall toward the marble staircase, he bade Rao follow him with a light. The youth accordingly procured a candle, and Florimel repaired to his bedchamber, attended by the sable page.

"Drag forth that tin box from under the couch, my boy," said the nobleman. Then, the moment this was done, he added, "And now take something to sweep off the dust before I open it."

Florimel's command was forthwith obeyed; and when the box was thus rendered fit for his aristocratic fingers to touch, he proceeded to open it with a key attached to a small bunch which he was in the habit of carrying in his pocket.

But scarcely had he raised the lid when a cry of mingled amazement and alarm burst from his lips, for, behold! the papers were gone, the tin case was empty.

"Is anything the matter, my lord?" inquired Rao, contemplating his master with looks expressive of a deep and earnest interest.

"Almighty God! what can be the meaning of this?" exclaimed Florimel, a ghastly pallor now spreading itself over his countenance and a nervous trembling seizing on his

entire frame. "The papers gone! The sanctity of my own chamber violated by the hand of a thief! What does it all mean?"

"Your lordship seems to miss something of importance?" said Rao, still gazing earnestly upon him.

"Importance, boy!" ejaculated the bewildered and terrified nobleman, regardless of what he was saying, "importance, forsooth! It is ruin, absolute ruin to me — or at least the chance of ruin!" he exclaimed, in a wild tone and with frantic gesture.

"Ruin!" murmured Rao to himself, as he turned aside for a moment, to conceal Heaven only knows what expression of countenance as he repeated that word, that appalling word, "Ruin!"

"I cannot have placed the documents elsewhere," said the nobleman, struggling to wrestle against the excitement of his feelings and soothe himself into the calmness requisite to look this menacing calamity face to face. "And yet it must be so. Yes, I have doubtless secured these papers elsewhere, now forgetting alike the place and the circumstance itself. Such will unquestionably prove the case," he added, in a musing tone, "for no one could have visited that box without leaving some trace of violence behind. Yet it was not broken open, the lock was not forced, and the key is always in my possession. During the day it is about my person; by night it is placed under my pillow. True, I sleep with my chamber door unlocked; but who could possibly have done this at night-time without disturbing me?"

Thus mused Lord Florimel, in a tone which, although low, was still sufficiently audible to reach the ears of Rao, whose presence he seemed to have forgotten, and who was standing at a short distance with his eyes fixed steadfastly upon his master's countenance.

For a minute longer did Florimel stand gazing down into the empty box, straining to wring from his memory some recollection to guide him to the discovery of the missing papers; then, all on a sudden feeling how useless it was for him thus to give way to a bewildering perplexity instead of adopting the practical measure of a rigorous search, he turned abruptly toward a chest of drawers which stood behind him.

"What, are you still here?" he demanded of Rao, whose presence actually startled him for the moment.

"Your lordship did not command me to retire," answered the youth, in a subdued and mild tone.

"True! Assist me, then, to examine all these drawers," said Florimel. "It is a parcel of very important papers which I have lost, or rather mislaid, for lost they can scarcely be," he added, with the sickly endeavour to buoy himself up by means of that hope to which men cling even in their very desperation.

But vainly were the drawers searched; fruitlessly were all their contents flung forth and scattered upon the carpet. The documents were not to be found. The cupboards in that chamber and the adjoining dressing-room were next examined; but with equal want of success. Every nook was searched, every corner was ransacked; still no signs of the missing papers were discovered. At length Lord Florimel remembered the plate-chest: surely he must have deposited the deeds there. But no, not a trace of them was visible; and, after three-quarters of an hour's fruitless investigation, he was compelled to admit to himself that the documents must have indeed been stolen.

And now, amidst the whirlwind of perplexing and torturing ideas which swept through his brain, his suspicions could settle upon no one. There was not in his household a single person whose name suggested itself in association with this deed. All was darkness, all was mystery; and in spite of his own settled convictions, in spite of the only one possible conclusion to which he could now come, namely, that the papers must have been purloined, he still sought to delude himself with the belief that they were only mislaid, thus hoping on even against the death of hope itself.

But suddenly reflecting that it would be unwise to suffer the magnitude of his loss and the menacing aspect of its nature to become generally known, he made some observation to Rao to the effect that it was very annoying, but not quite so serious as he had at first fancied; then, bidding the boy precede him with the light, he hurried back to the apartment where he had left his solicitor.

To this gentleman he imparted the mysterious loss which he had experienced; and the worthy solicitor, fully comprehending how serious it was, and well knowing that

Rigden's habitual sharp practice would induce him to seize with avidity upon any point advantageous to a client, Mr. Cresswell, we say, deplored the occurrence with the most unfeigned sincerity. He, however, recommended that the misfortune should be hushed up with the utmost secrecy, so that the enemy might not learn the weak point which had thus been laid bare on Lord Florimel's side.

"Alas!" said the young nobleman, "this precaution, I am afraid, will prove very unnecessary. For if the papers be really stolen, they must have been purloined for a special purpose; and to answer what end could they be taken, unless it be to serve the interests of this claimant to my peerage and my property? Oh, my dear Cresswell, I have a presentiment striking cold to my heart, and warning me that I am a lost, a ruined, a disgraced and despoiled man. Misfortunes are accumulating thickly upon me. The object of my dearest, holiest, tenderest love suddenly becomes estranged to me; and now a more worldly calamity threatens me with destruction."

Thus speaking, the unfortunate young nobleman gave way to his tears.

The kind-hearted attorney endeavoured to console him, but this attempt was by no means an easy task. At length Florimel's natural dignity as a man effected what the soothing words of the lawyer could not accomplish; and recalling every moral energy to his aid, he said, "This weakness is unworthy of me. I will tutor my mind to battle valiantly against misfortune; and strangely altered though my prospects have suddenly become, I will not give way to despair so long as the feeblest glimmer of hope remains. Nor will I believe that the worst is in store for me until the worst shall have really happened. In the meantime, my dear Cresswell, you must take all the necessary measures for the defence of this suit; and we shall at least have the satisfaction of fighting our foes hand to hand and foot to foot."

The lawyer was well pleased to observe his noble client entering upon this improved frame of mind; and, faithfully promising that the battle should not be lost without a gallant stand and a desperate struggle, he took his departure.

For some time after he was thus left alone, Lord Florimel remained plunged in a deep reverie; but suddenly starting from his meditations and his seat at the same moment an

idea struck him, he wrapped himself up in his cloak and issued from the mansion.

An hour afterward, Mr. Rigden received the following letter, the contents of which were written in a feigned hand, but evidently by a female:

"The documents have been missed by Lord Florimel. He and his attorney are in a perfect consternation. They know that their cause will be lost; but they purpose to make a gallant stand and enter upon a desperate struggle against you and your client. Their conduct, however, only serves to prove more than ever the vital importance of those papers. Florimel entertains not the slightest suspicion how the deeds have disappeared; but he does suspect that they have found their way into the hands of either yourself or Mr. Woodfall. Be cautious, be firm, be secret.

"From time to time I shall give you such information as I may be enabled to glean, and which may prove beneficial to your client's interests."

This letter bore neither date nor signature; but Mr. Rigden had no difficulty in comprehending that it emanated from the same hand which had put the stolen documents into his possession, those documents the vital importance of which was now made more apparent than ever.

CHAPTER IX

SCENES AT THE BEGGAR'S STAFF

It was about eight o'clock in the evening, the same evening on which the incidents of the two preceding chapters occurred, and Carrotty Poll was seated with her friend the Gallows' Widow in the little parlour behind the bar at the Beggar's Staff. They were discussing a pint of wine between them; and their conversation was turning upon many matters, — speculations as to what could have become of the Magsman and the Big Beggarman, and remarks on the continued absence of Mobbs being amongst the topics thus commented upon.

Their discourse was all the more earnest and continuous inasmuch as there happened to be but few guests in the public-room at the time; and thus their confabulation was not interrupted, the services of the slipshod waiter being equal to the demands made upon the excisable articles dispensed from the bar-counter.

"Well, I wonder what can be keeping Mobbs away like this," said Carrotty Poll, making the remark for the tenth time on the present occasion. "Surely no harm can have befallen him?"

"He is too wide awake to let the milliner get the advantage over him," observed the Gallows' Widow. "That she murdered Grumley, we are quite certain; but that she could succeed in getting Mobbs into her net. I do not for an instant suppose."

"And yet three days have now passed," said Carrotty Poll, "and he does not make his appearance. He came to tell us how his first interview with Mrs. Brace on the subject of Grumley's unaccountable absence went off."

"Or rather how it was interrupted by the screams that

came from another part of the milliner's house," observed Lizzy Marks, the Gallows' Widow. "But Mobbs told us that she had confessed the deed, that she even showed him where Grumley was buried, and that he was going back again to enter into arrangements with her. Now, we have only two conjectures to choose between — "

"Either that Mobbs has followed the fate of his master or that he has bolted with the cash extorted from the milliner," interrupted Carrotty Poll. "Is that what you mean?"

"Just so," replied the Gallows' Widow. "But I, for my part, do not think that Mobbs has been made away with; on the contrary, I firmly believe that he has made away with himself."

"In other words, that he has cut and run in order to cheat us out of our regulars," said Carrotty Poll. "Well, if he don't make his appearance soon, I shall entertain the same opinion. But we won't judge hastily. Circumstances may be keeping him away for a few days, and these he will explain, should he turn up once more. Let us therefore wait a little while before we resolve on adopting any step in the matter."

"And in the meantime, Mrs. Brace may bolt, and we shall lose every chance of getting a shilling from her," said the Gallows' Widow.

"That is not likely," responded the Big Beggarman's daughter. "Whether she has made away with Mobbs or compromised the thing with him, she believes herself safe and secure, depend upon it, and she will not easily be induced to give up her brilliant position and her splendid establishment at the West End. No, she will not run away, Lizzy; I am not afraid of that. And if Mobbs should really be still negotiating with her, he would be precious savage if we were to interfere in the business. It would at once show Mrs. Brace that others were in the secret besides himself, and then she really would bolt, beyond all manner of doubt."

"Well, have it your own way, Poll," said Elizabeth Marks. "We will remain quiet a few days; and if Mobbs don't turn up in the meantime, then we must hold a serious conversation to decide how we shall act."

"I am glad you've fallen into my views on the subject," observed Poll.

"And now, when I think of it," exclaimed the Gallows' Widow, "I've got something of importance to tell you. In a

word, I'm pretty sure that I have discovered a clue to the abode of that Julia Lightfoot."

"Mrs. Page, you mean?" cried Carrotty Poll. "You know she married that rascal Page who gave evidence at the Old Bailey against Ramsey and Martin, and also against my father and Briggs. But what information have you procured concerning them?"

"The Kinchin-Grand, who has been looking out for them this long time," answered Carrotty Poll, "saw them yesterday morning looking at two houses which are to let in the Edgeware Road, — Paradise Villas I think the terrace is called, — and he afterward dogged them as far as a house-agent's office in the neighbourhood. When they came out again, he heard Page observe to his wife that 'the house would just suit them;' and Julia answered that 'they should be able to move into it next week.' So, you perceive, we are on the right scent at last."

"Capital!" ejaculated Carrotty Poll. "But why didn't the Kinchin-Grand follow them to their present place of residence? If anything should happen to prevent them from taking that house in the Edgeware Road, all traces of them may once more be lost, and I never shall be happy till we've revenged ourselves on that cursed Julia and her husband."

"The Kinchin-Grand would have followed them home," answered the Gallows' Widow, "but they took a coach immediately after they came out of the house-agent's office, and the vehicle drove too quick for my spy to keep them in view. However, there seems to be little doubt, from the observations they exchanged and which I have repeated to you, that they took the house of the agent yesterday morning. If so, depend upon it we will be revenged before they have been in possession of their new abode many weeks," added the Gallows' Widow, her countenance lowering into an expression of ominous ferocity.

Carrotty Poll was about to make some observation in approval of this dark menace, when the waiter entered to inform her "that a gentleman desired to speak to the master or the mistress of the house." Both the Big Beggarman's daughter and the Gallows' Widow rose and peeped forth at the visitor, who was standing at the bar-counter, muffled in a cloak, but with enough of his countenance revealed

to enable them to catch a distinct view of his features. He was a total stranger to them, young, very good-looking, and with nothing in his appearance to excite their suspicions in any way. They accordingly resumed their seats and bade the waiter conduct the gentleman into their presence. This instruction was immediately obeyed, and the visitor was showed into the parlour.

"I am perfectly unknown to you," he said, in a soft and pleasing voice, as he took the chair to which Carrotty Poll pointed; "but I trust that you will pardon this intrusion, inasmuch as I am well prepared to pay for any services which may be rendered me in the business that has brought me hither, and to bestow a handsome recompense for any trouble that I may give."

"Who are you, sir, and what has brought you to this place?" inquired Carrotty Poll, speaking in her politest tone.

"I am Lord Florimel," answered the young nobleman, for he indeed it was; "and my business is of a two-fold nature, as I will immediately explain to you."

"First of all, my lord," said Carrotty Poll, "please to inform us who recommended you to apply here for any service that you may need at the hands of the people belonging to this house or frequenting it."

"The explanation will not offend, I hope?" observed Florimel, with some little hesitation.

"It can't offend, my lord, if it is the truth," was the response.

"You speak with a frankness that shall experience an equal degree of candour on my side," immediately resumed the nobleman. "In a word, then, every one who knows anything at all of London life must be aware that the Beggar's Staff is a great resort for persons of a particular class; and I fancy that you are not altogether unaccustomed to receive visits from noblemen and gentlemen who on occasions stand in want of able hands, keen eyes, and secret servitors, for all of which auxiliaries they are able and willing to pay handsomely. Well, I see by your countenance that such is the fact; and you therefore cannot be astonished if the reputation of the Beggar's Staff is tolerably familiar to all those who may be termed men of the world or men about town."

"The explanation is perfectly satisfactory," said Carrotty

Poll. "And now for the business which has brought your lordship here. You may speak candidly and openly; if we enter into your views whatever we undertake will be performed secretly, promptly, and faithfully, and if we decline, there is no harm done."

"I do not think you will refuse," observed Florimel, "because I am going to ask you to do nothing for which I am not prepared to pay a handsome price. In the first instance, I wish that some active, intelligent, and persevering agent should be set to work to discover the abode of a certain lady whose name and description I will give you. I mention a description, because she may have assumed another name. I must, however, observe that she is a lady of unblemished virtue and stainless character; and that it is because I am deeply attached to her and that she has taken offence as some fancied misconduct on my part, it is for these reasons, I say, and for no dishonourable motive, that I am so desirous to trace out her present abode."

"We have nothing to do with motives, my lord," said Carrotty Poll, "but we will undertake the service you thus require at our hands. Give me the name and description of the lady, and by to-morrow at midday a dozen active agents shall be instituting inquiries in every part of London and its suburbs."

'The lady's name is Pauline Clarendon," returned Florimel; "and here is an accurate description of her personal appearance," he continued, handing a piece of paper to Carrotty Poll. "But mark me well and understand me fully, when I beseech you to conduct this research in such a manner that the proceeding may not reach the ears of Miss Clarendon. For were she to learn that I am adopting such a course to discover her residence, it would only widen the breach now existing between us; indeed, she would never forgive me."

"Your lordship's wishes shall be duly attended to," said Carrotty Poll. "And now what is the second branch of the two-fold business that has brought your lordship to the Staff?"

"I will explain myself as concisely and yet as plainly as possible," returned the young nobleman. "I am in the habit of keeping certain valuable documents in a large tin case, which stands under the bed in my chamber. The key I always carry about with me during the day, and place

it under my pillow at night. It is a peculiar key, made to fit a lock of no ordinary construction. In a word, a mere skeleton key could not possibly open that lock. Nevertheless, I have discovered, within the last two or three hours, that this tin box has been opened, inasmuch as its contents are gone. No violence was used; not a trace of foul play is visible in the matter. And what renders the affair more difficult and mysterious still, is that I cannot fasten my suspicions upon a single soul dwelling beneath my roof; I cannot lay my finger upon the shoulder of any one and say, 'This is the thief.'"

"And yet the papers must have been purloined for some special purpose?" remarked Carrotty Poll, inquiringly.

"Yes," replied Florimel. "A certain lawyer named Rigden, and a certain person named George Woodfall —"

"An artist?" exclaimed the Gallows' Widow, struck by the name.

"The same," cried the nobleman. "Are you acquainted with him?"

"I have seen him once," was the answer. "He was then in the service of a certain Mr. Shrubsole, picture-dealer, of Newgate Street."

And the Gallows' Widow exchanged a rapid but significant glance with Carrotty Poll; for the reader cannot have forgotten that Elizabeth Marks became acquainted — if acquaintanceship it could be termed — with George Woodfall on that memorable night when the Magsman escaped from Newgate.

"But pray proceed, my lord," she said; "for the little I know of Mr. Woodfall cannot be rendered in any way available to your lordship's purposes, nor indeed would Mr. Woodfall be overwell pleased to renew his acquaintance with me," she added, with that low inward chuckle in which the woman sometimes indulged.

"I was about to observe," continued Florimel, perceiving that the Gallows' Widow had some private reasons of her own for not choosing to be more communicative respecting her knowledge of the young artist, "I was about to observe that Mr. Woodfall has instituted certain law-proceedings against me, and that a Mr. Rigden is his attorney. Now this Mr. Rigden is a man whose practice is notoriously sharp, and who would not stick at trifles in order to gain

his ends. The papers which have been stolen from me have therefore assuredly found their way into the possession of either Rigden or Woodfall, or perhaps both conjointly. It is of the utmost importance for me to recover them, and I will give two thousand guineas to the person who shall restore them to me."

Florimel ceased speaking, and looked first at Carrotty Poll, then at the Gallows' Widow, in order to observe the impression which this liberal offer had made upon them. The former started with an actual paroxysm of avaricious feelings suddenly and powerfully excited, while the usually cold and passionless features of the latter instantaneously brightened up with an expression of vivid interest. Then the two women once more exchanged significant looks; but this time they were less furtive and more lingering, as much as to consult each other what reply should be made to the brilliant proposal and what course should be adopted.

"Well, do you think anything can be done in this business?" asked Florimel, at length.

"Will your lordship leave the matter entirely in our hands?" demanded Carrotty Poll.

"Yes, with much pleasure, if you can hold out to me any prospect of success," was the immediate response.

"We will do all we can, my lord," rejoined Carrotty Poll. Then, after a brief pause, she added, "For I have already a certain plan in my head. Of course your lordship does not care how the deeds are recovered, so long as they are restored to you?"

"How can I care what means are adopted to accomplish that aim?" cried the young nobleman. "Have I not been scandalously robbed in this matter? Therefore if you choose to fight my enemies with the same weapons that they have employed against me, I shall not experience the slightest remorse."

"Then there is no more to be said upon the business — at least for the present," observed Carrotty Poll.

"Yes, we must have a description of the deeds," said the Gallows' Widow, who fancied that her companion in iniquity meditated a burglary in Rigden's house, through the agency of some of their numerous adherents and friends.

"No, I don't want any description at all," exclaimed the Big Beggarman's daughter, in her sharp, vixenish tones.

"You have no idea, Lizzy, what my present scheme is; but you shall know all by and by. Don't think, however, for a moment that I mean to have Rigden's house broken open and robbed. That game won't do, at any price. It might fail, or the wrong papers might be brought away, or the real ones may not be there at all. In a word, a burglary for such a purpose would have a thousand chances against its success, and might involve us all in trouble. No, the thing must be managed by stratagem, a good stratagem, too; and that scheme I have already got cut and dried in my own mind. Some weeks, perhaps months, may elapse before this scheme succeeds; but I will pledge my soul as to its triumph in the long run," added the young woman, with so strong an emphasis and such an evident conviction of the truth of what she was saying that the flame of hope once more burned brightly in Lord Florimel's breast.

"Well, my worthy creature," he said, in a flattering tone, "I leave myself entirely in your hands. The papers will not be wanted, or, rather, their loss can do no possible harm, for some months to come, inasmuch as the law's delays are numerous indeed. And now tell me whether you would like to receive an earnest of my liberal intentions with regard to both the matters that you have taken in hand?"

"You may give us a hundred pounds on account, my lord, if you will," said Carrotty Poll, her palm itching to feel the touch of the young nobleman's gold.

"A hundred pounds!" he exclaimed. "I will give you five hundred, because I am confident that you are sincere and that you will accomplish everything you have undertaken."

Lord Florimel accordingly counted down bank-notes for the sum he had named; and the two women's eyes sparkled with joy as they contemplated the welcome pieces of "flimsy-paper." The young nobleman then took his leave, and, wrapping himself well up in his capacious cloak, he sallied forth from the Beggar's Staff.

CHAPTER X

THE UNKNOWN LADY ONCE MORE

It was about eleven o'clock that night when Lord Florimel returned to his own mansion in Piccadilly. Rao was instantaneously in attendance upon him; and the moment he had conducted his master into the parlour where a cheerful fire was blazing in the grate and the table was spread for supper, he handed the young nobleman a letter.

"The person who brought this requested your lordship's earliest attention to it," said the page.

"And who did bring it?" inquired Florimel, listlessly, as he threw himself into an armchair near the fire.

"A tall footman, my lord," was the response; "but I do not know in whose service he is."

"Ah! a tall footman?" echoed Florimel, now suddenly inspired with a sentiment of curiosity; and glancing at the letter, he observed that the address was penned in precisely the same affected and artificial scrawl as that of the envelope which had contained the masquerade-ticket four or five days previously.

His first impulse was to throw the letter unopened into the fire and thereby offer up his feelings of mingled curiosity and tender interest as a sacrifice to his love for Pauline Clarendon; but a second thought reminded him that she had voluntarily, spontaneously, and deliberately released him from all allegiance toward her; and, to speak the truth, he was precisely in one of those humours when a sense of loneliness and desolation prompts the individual to court any company that may afford a distraction from his gloomy meditations, or plunge into any adventure that may seem calculated to wean the mind from melancholy topics of thought.

He accordingly opened the letter and read the contents in the following manner:

"The Unknown Lady requests an interview with the Lord Florimel. She would not so far forget her own dignity as to solicit this favour, after the cold and even insulting neglect with which her overtures for a meeting were treated by the Lord Florimel the other night; but it is of some importance to herself that she should have five minutes' conversation with his lordship as soon as possible. Should his lordship be absent when the bearer of this note calls at his lordship's mansion in Piccadilly, the same individual will return at the hour when it is probable that the Lord Florimel will be at home. The Unknown Lady therefore throws herself upon the Lord Florimel's generosity, and beseeches him to accompany her domestic whithersoever he may lead and under whatsoever circumstances of secrecy he may suggest."

"Did the bearer of this note inquire when I should return home?" demanded Florimel, as soon as he had read the contents of the missive.

"He did, my lord," replied Rao; "and I assured him that I expected your lordship home every moment."

"What further observation did he make?"

"He said that he should take the liberty of returning at midnight precisely, for your lordship's answer."

"Did you notice what kind of a looking man he was?" demanded Florimel.

"He studiously averted his countenance, my lord, as he stood upon the front door-steps," replied Rao.

"How know you that this was studiously done?" asked Florimel, somewhat surprised at the observation.

"It struck me, my lord, that the man was desirous to conceal his features from observation," was the calm and unembarrassed response.

"Well, when he returns at twelve, tell him that I will accompany him at once," said Florimel, after a few moments' reflection; "and then come and let me know of his arrival."

Rao bowed and quitted the room.

"Yes, I will grant the Unknown Lady this interview which she so earnestly solicits," thought Florimel within himself, as soon as the door had closed behind the sable page. "Not that I will yield to temptation or forget my

vows to Pauline. No, all the blandishments of that voluptuous creature whom I am presently to meet, shall be vainly expended upon me; all her seductive wiles and amorous fascinations will find me only the more resolute in my resistance, only the more stoically determined in my anchoritism. And yet it would really serve Miss Pauline right if I did give her some good ground to be jealous, since, for want of real motives, she flies to imaginary ones in order to pick a quarrel with me. But, no, I will not act so ungenerous a part; I will not play so treacherous a game. I love Pauline, love her devotedly, and I will remain true to my vows. At the same time, it would be unhandsome in the extreme, ungentlemanly to a degree, uncourteous and cowardly in every sense of the word, to refuse the Unknown Lady the interview which she so earnestly desires. Besides, it will serve as a little distraction for me in my present mournful mood and unsettled position; and it will likewise afford me an opportunity of testing the strength of my affection for Pauline. Ah! cruel Pauline, if you only knew how great is the temptation which I am this night prepared to resist on your account, you would not continue estranged from me."

And yet, while thus musing, Lord Florimel could not restrain his ardent imagination from retracing the path of those pleasures which he had once enjoyed in the society of the Unknown Lady, and which he had so graphically described to Lord Montgomery, — pleasures the memory of which now made the blood run with a hotter glow in his veins, his cheeks flush with a deeper animation, and his pulse beat with a quicker continuity, pleasures the recollection of which had already more than half-weaned him from his fealty toward Pauline, despite the efforts which he used to persuade himself that he was fully competent to resist all temptation.

But, ah! reader, blame him not too severely, castigate him not too harshly with thy vituperation; for remember that he had no longer the same motive which rendered him strong to refuse and made him potent to resist when the Unknown's overtures were signified to him through the medium of the masquerade-ticket and the blue domino. Then he was in possession of the love and confidence of Pauline; now both were withdrawn. On that occasion

he had nought to trouble his mind with care nor harass it with gloomy presentiment; but on this occasion he felt as if some friend were suddenly extending a hand to him at the moment when the solace of friendship became so highly necessary and so acceptably welcome.

He was still pondering upon the incident which had thus unexpectedly presented itself as a means of diversion for his troubled thoughts, when Rao entered the room to announce that the tall footman had returned.

Florimel immediately started from his seat, resumed his hat and cloak, and went out to the front door where the tall footman was standing in such a position that the broad brim of his hat completely shaded his countenance from the reflection of the hall lamp.

"Lead on, I will follow you," said Lord Florimel, in a hasty whisper.

The tall footman accordingly moved rapidly away, proceeding along Piccadilly in the direction of Hyde Park, Lord Florimel keeping close in his rear.

But Rao was likewise following at a distance, unperceived and unsuspected by either the tall footman or the young nobleman.

In a few minutes the corner of Hyde Park was gained, and the mysterious footman struck into the enclosure. Just glancing around to assure himself that Lord Florimel was close behind, he continued his way at a rapid pace, until a dark equipage appeared at a little distance. The moon was shining with a feeble and sickly lustre, but there was light enough to enable Lord Florimel to observe that the vehicle was a barouche, of a sombre colour and with no armorial bearings upon the panels, that it was drawn by two dark horses, and that the countenance of the coachman, as he sat upon his box, was almost completely muffled up in a shawl neckerchief.

"Enter, my lord," said the tall footman, as he hurriedly opened the door of the carriage.

Florimel instantaneously obeyed the request thus made, although it sounded rather like a command that was imperiously given; but the impression of neither tone nor words dwelt upon the nobleman's mind more than an instant, for, on entering the barouche, he was immediately received in a pair of arms that snatched him to a heaving bosom,

while a moist, plump mouth, whence exhaled the most fragrant of breaths, simultaneously fastened itself upon his own lips.

The door was closed with promptitude, all was darkness within the vehicle, and, as the splendid animals whirled it rapidly away, Lord Florimel sank unresistingly into the warm and fervid embrace which had thus received him. Alas! poor Pauline, thou wast then forgotten indeed.

Meantime Rao had kept close enough behind his master and the tall footman so as never to lose sight of them for a single instant; and yet he had remained sufficiently aloof to prevent them from perceiving that any one was dogging their footsteps. The equipage was waiting beneath the shade of some trees in Hyde Park; and thus, favoured by that gloominess of locality as well as by his own dark apparel and sable complexion, the agile and wary youth was enabled to glide beneath the carriage just at the moment when the tall footman was opening the door for Florimel to jump in. Rao then clung with his arms and legs to the beam that passed under the barouche; and, retaining his hold there with the tenacity of a monkey clinging to a bough, he was whirled away along with the equipage.

We have already observed that the interior of the vehicle was quite dark, the blinds being drawn up; and thus Lord Florimel was as unable to obtain even a glimpse of his fair companion as he was on the former occasion. But no sooner did he feel her lips joining to his own in a long, impassioned, fervid caress, no sooner did he experience the warmth of her embrace and catch the murmurs of joy and gladness which escaped from her tongue during the intervals of those devouring kisses, no sooner, too, did his hand encounter the uncovered, glowing bosom which was heaving against his chest, than he immediately became aware that this was indeed the heroine of the night of love, mystery, and pleasure, the details of which he had recounted to Lord Montgomery.

"Gabriel, my beloved friend," murmured the lady, at length, in that soft and fluid voice which was so familiar to his ear, because, if once heard, it could never be forgotten, "are you angry with me for having adopted a stratagem to bring you back to my arms?"

"Angry! Oh, who could be angry with you, lovely un-

known?" exclaimed Florimel, his voice broken with a profound sigh of pleasure. "But what stratagem have you adopted?"

"That letter, which told you that some business of importance rendered an interview necessary," replied the lady.

"And such is not the fact?" said the young nobleman, interrogatively.

"No other motive save love, no other impulse save passion, prompted my conduct, Gabriel," whispered the lady, redoubling the fond ardour of her caresses and lavishing upon her companion blandishments that would have thrown the veriest anchorite into the delirium of a blissful intoxication.

"Dangerous as you are enchanting, omnipotent for mischief as you must be captivatingly beautiful," exclaimed the young nobleman, his soul already exalted to an enthusiastic pitch; and, as he alluded to the personal loveliness with which he supposed the fascinating Unknown to be endowed, he passed his hand gently over her countenance, pausing, as it were, at every feature. "Yes, you are handsome, very handsome," he continued, in a musing tone. "Your face is nobly formed, perfect in all its details; your head is elegantly shaped, and your hair is of velvet softness. Then your neck, ah, that is smooth as the fairest skin can be."

"But I must not suffer you to pay me all the compliments and receive none in return," exclaimed the lady. Then, as her own fair hand played caressingly with Lord Florimel's countenance, she said, "And you too, my Gabriel, are gloriously handsome — no, not gloriously, but femininely handsome, and I love you, oh, I love you, Gabriel, my own dear Gabriel."

And as she gave utterance to these words with a sort of cannibal concentration of tone and feeling, — that is to say, with a fervid earnestness and a warmth of passion as if she could have devoured the object of her eulogy, — she strained him to her glowing breast, she lavished upon him the tenderest and the most fervid caresses, she seemed ready to abandon herself to him even to the extent of her immortal soul, were it possible, the same as on the former occasion she had with such a sensuous enthusiasm abandoned to him her person.

"And now, my beloved Gabriel," she murmured, as she lay in his arms panting with joy and palpitating with thrilling

emotions, "and now I must take you seriously and solemnly to task for treating me with such cold disdain the other night."

"Ah! I know to what you allude, my charming friend," exclaimed Florimel; "but may I hope that you will not question me upon this point?"

"On the contrary, I must exact a full and faithful explanation," cried the lady. "For it is no slight nor venial offence which you committed upon that occasion," she continued, in a tone of good-natured raillery. "Remember, my dear Gabriel, that when we met and parted on a certain night fifteen or sixteen months ago, you besought me to accord you another and speedy interview. I promised that I would; but circumstances afforded me no opportunity until the other day. Then I conveyed to you by means as significant as any that could be adopted, an overture for a renewal of our acquaintance, our friendship, our love; in a word, I gave you an appointment, the manner and the place being symbolized, or rather expressed, by the masquerade-ticket and the blue domino. And yet you availed yourself not of that intimation. You treated me with indifference, with scorn, with disdain, with contempt; and if I did not love you dearly, very dearly, Gabriel, yes, very dearly indeed," added the Unknown, while she bestowed several tender caresses upon the young nobleman, "I should not have proved so unmindful of my own dignity as to have courted your society again. But I forgive you, Gabriel, for that instance of coldness and neglect; I forgive you because I love you, and because I am certain that you would not intentionally and wilfully wound the feelings of one who is thus devotedly attached to you."

"No, not for worlds," exclaimed Florimel; and even as he yielded himself up, heart and soul, to that whirlpool of sensations and feelings which now engulfed him, he experienced a sharp pang of remorse striking through his heart as the image of Pauline hovered amidst the confusion of his brain.

"Tell me, Gabriel, tell me," said the unknown siren, "wherefore you absented yourself from that masquerade?"

"Oh, if you would wrest the truth from me!" exclaimed Florimel, with a species of shudder as the image of Pauline was now brought back more vividly still to his memory.

"Tell me, tell me that truth, whatever it may be," murmured the lady, redoubling her caresses and literally endeavouring not only to overpower her companion with the ravishing ecstasies of her blandishments, but likewise to absorb, as it were, his whole soul in her own and thus render him entirely captive to her will, her sense, and her sentiment. "Explain to me the cause of your absence on that occasion, dearest Gabriel," she said, with a voice full of irresistible sweetness and with a manner which, though utter darkness prevailed in the carriage, was nevertheless sensibly fraught with a coaxing charm of superlative seductiveness.

"Listen, then, my unknown friend," said Florimel. "I love a young lady, a certain Miss Pauline Clarendon, who is beautiful as an angel and jealous as a dragon; and when I received the ticket and the domino the other day, I was basking in the sunshine of her favour, consequently I resisted the temptation held out by yourself."

"And now, has the aspect of your love undergone a change?" inquired the lady.

"Yes, for Pauline is angry with me, I know not wherefore," responded Florimel; "and indeed she has bade me think of her no more. Therefore, when I received your note this evening, partially because I was miserable and required solace, and also somewhat because I felt it would be unkind and discourteous to a degree not to obey the desire specified in your letter, for these reasons, I say, did I keep the present appointment."

"And now are you sorry that you have done so?" asked the Unknown, in a voice that trembled as if with apprehension relative to what the response might be.

"No, I am not sorry, nor do I repent," exclaimed the young nobleman, nerving himself with that species of desperation which prompts the individual who commits an imprudence, a perfidy, or a crime, to plunge headlong into the tide of the enjoyment constituting the temptation and therein endeavour to drown memory, remorse, the image of the absent wronged one, and all the better feelings of the soul.

"Dearest, dearest Gabriel," murmured the lady, her tone and manner full of the enthusiasm of mingled joy, passion, and triumph, "how delicious it is to receive such an assurance from your lips! But tell me, oh, tell me whether you have

religiously kept my secret, that is to say, our secret, the secret of that adventure which brought us together fifteen months ago, and which is now renewed again to-night. Tell me, I say, whether you have maintained this secret inviolable. Oh, you tremble, Gabriel, your hand shakes in my own, and you draw yourself back with a species of embarrassment from my embrace. By these signs, then, do I know that you have not kept the seal of inviolability altogether upon your lips; and yet do not fancy that I am angry with you, for, after all, how little was there to tell which could possibly be fraught with any chance of discovery."

"Once, and once only, dearest friend," murmured Lord Florimel, in a tone of deep contrition, "have I opened my lips respecting that adventure. Solemnly and sacredly do I assure you that, with the single exception to which I now allude, the adventure has been religiously treasured up in my bosom."

"And who was the confidant that you thus selected, Gabriel?" inquired the lady.

"A friend, a sincere, trustworthy, and valued friend of mine," was the answer, "a man with whom I enjoy the fullest intimacy."

"But who is he?" asked the Unknown.

"Lord Montgomery," replied Florimel. "Do you know him? For of course you must have heard of him, no matter in what circle of society you move."

"Yes, I have heard of him, and I think I have seen him," said the lady, in a quiet manner. "And now tell me, Gabriel, what you did with the blue domino which I sent you."

"How is it possible that you can trouble yourself concerning a piece of masquerading trumpery?" cried Florimel, amazed at the question which had just been put to him.

"Simply because it may serve you for another occasion," was the immediate response of the ready-witted lady, "should you take it into your head to visit the next masquerade and meet me there. Then, being aware of the precise character of the domino which you have already in your possession, I should know whom to accost in the crowded assembly."

"Yes, dearest lady, we will meet again, most assuredly," exclaimed Florimel, catching her in his arms; "and it shall be at a masquerade if you will. But the dress to which you

allude cannot serve the purpose on any such future occasion, inasmuch as I caused it to be destroyed within a few minutes after I received it."

"You caused it to be destroyed?" said the lady, in so peculiar a tone of mingled incredulity and surprise that Florimel actually started at the seriousness which she thus appeared to be attaching to an affair fraught with so little consequence in his estimation.

"I pledge you my honour most solemnly, most sacredly," he exclaimed, "that I gave the blue domino to one of my dependents with orders for its instantaneous destruction, and I have no reason to believe that my commands were disobeyed. And if you ask me, dearest lady, wherefore I took so extraordinary a step, I will candidly explain it by the assurance that it was to place the object of temptation beyond my reach. But wherefore do you attach so much importance to these trivial details? Of what avail is the fate of a paltry blue domino to you?"

"Because I wish to study all the points of your character, my Gabriel," was the ready response, "and there are no better means than by thus pursuing a thread of explanations connected with the tender passion. I now perceive, therefore, that you are fervently devoted to Miss Pauline Clarendon, and that you would have remained faithful to her image had she not outraged you by her unfounded suspicions. I even see that rather than trust entirely to your own strength of mind in your late course of allegiance to that lady, you adopted the prudential plan of destroying the garment which might even at the last moment have proved an irresistible temptation. Think you, then, my dear Gabriel, that I am unmindful of all the truths which these little incidents teach me concerning your character? No; I shall treasure them up, I shall ponder upon them, and they will instruct me how to know you better and understand you thoroughly in the long run. And now answer me one question which, being so very trivial, I must candidly attribute to its right source, — indeed, to no loftier feeling than a mere passing sentiment of curiosity."

"Speak, lady; put your question and I will answer it, if possible," said the young nobleman.

"Are you certain that the blue domino was destroyed?" inquired the lady. "Do you feel quite convinced that the

servant to whom you entrusted the commission performed it faithfully?"

"I am morally certain that such was the case," returned Florimel; "but I cannot undertake to affirm that the point is beyond all doubt. At the same time, I recollect full well that I ordered my black page — a new dependent recently introduced into my service — to destroy the blue domino; and he could have no possible object in disobeying my orders. But surely some motive more important than a transitory curiosity has dictated these questions?"

"No, I can assure you, my dear Gabriel — "

At this moment the carriage stopped; and the lady, hastily throwing a scarf over Florimel's head, tied it around his neck in such a manner that it could not possibly shift, much less come off, of its own accord.

"You mean me to accompany you, then, dearest, to the boudoir of darkness, love, and mystery?" he murmured, in a tone tremulous with varied feelings, the hope of pleasure struggling against a sentiment of remorse, the consciousness of approaching Elysium warring with the pangs which a sense of the deepest perfidy toward Pauline excited in his soul.

"Yes, I mean to introduce you thither once more," answered the lady, in her soft, dulcet tones; "that is to say, if you be agreeable to accompany me," she added, with a sudden accent of restraint.

"Oh, do not doubt it, my charming and adorable friend," exclaimed Florimel. "The net has ensnared me, I am a prey to the most irresistible of fascinations, the spell of the enchantress is upon me, and I yield, I yield! Alas, poor Pauline!" he murmured, his voice suddenly sinking to an inaudible note as these last words were thrown up from his very heart, despite of himself.

At this instant the door of the vehicle was opened by the tall footman, and the lady, having covered her own face with a thick black veil, assisted Lord Florimel to alight. She then unfastened a door in a garden wall; and while the footman, having shut up the carriage again, was reascending to his seat behind, Rao slipped from underneath the vehicle and glided rapidly and noiselessly as a snake into the shade of that garden wall. The vehicle drove quickly away while the lady and Lord Florimel passed into the garden,

the former stopping for an instant to fasten the door behind them.

As a matter of course, Rao was unable to follow through that means of ingress to the enclosure. But he unhesitatingly clambered up the wall the moment the garden door was closed, and in the twinkling of an eye he stood upon the other side. Then, cautiously and noiselessly threading his way amongst the maze of evergreens which thronged the grounds and thus favoured his progress, he was enabled by the partial moonlight to keep in view his master and the lady as they proceeded along a gravel walk, the latter holding the former by the hand and acting as guide.

Little leisure had Rao to contemplate the building which stood in the midst of the grounds whither he had thus audaciously introduced himself; for in about a couple of minutes the lady and Florimel paused at a low door belonging to that spacious edifice.

At this moment a cloud suddenly obscured the moon, throwing all that portion of the building into the deepest shade. With a boldness equalled only by the readiness of wit and the presence of mind that prompted the proceeding, Rao glided forward, crept rapidly and noiselessly along the wall, and reached the immediate vicinity of the low door just at the instant that the lady opened it.

"Now give me your hand once more, Gabriel," said the Unknown, "and I will lead you to that chamber which you yourself have denominated as the boudoir of darkness, love, and mystery."

Rao failed not to catch this observation; indeed, he was standing close by the lady as she uttered it, and the word "darkness," as applied to the boudoir, instantaneously confirmed him in the design which he had already formed and which he was indeed now waiting to carry into execution. This was nothing less than to follow the lady and the nobleman to the very end and issue of their adventure; and when he heard enough to satisfy him that the chamber whither they were about to repair was veiled in darkness, he was more resolute than ever in making the attempt already conceived.

The opportunity was at hand. For the door stood open, all was dark within, and the lady had turned around toward Florimel as she addressed to him the observation last

chronicled. The moon was totally concealed at that moment, the young noble was blindfolded, and over the countenance of the lady herself did a black veil hang, thus deepening even for her the obscurity which wrapped all things beneath the overhanging wall of the edifice. Every circumstance was therefore favourable at that particular instant for Rao's scheme, and, with the serpent-like property of rapid and noiseless gliding which seemed peculiar to him, the sable youth slid in a stooping posture over the threshold, into the building. His arms were immediately thrown out and swept cautiously around, and his hands encountered first the massive balusters of an antique staircase, then the steps themselves, covered with a thick carpeting. To ascertain these points was the work of one moment; to stand aside, gather himself up into the smallest compass, and hold his very breath while the lady and Florimel passed him by, were the incidents of the next moment.

The Unknown paused to close and fasten the door, and she then conducted Florimel up the staircase. Rao followed, the pitchy darkness favouring his design, and the thick carpet of the stairs adding to the security of his tread. With his hands he felt his way; and keen as the scent of an Indian on the trail of an enemy, did he maintain between those whom he was following and himself a distance precisely suitable to his purpose, neither approaching too near so as to incur the chance of running upon their heels, nor yet getting so far in the rear as to be unable to catch them up in time to enter the boudoir of darkness, love, and mystery, along with them.

And this latter aim was accomplished. Yes, no sooner did the Unknown Lady and Florimel stop short in the passage to which the stairs led, than Rao was on all fours at their very feet; then, the instant that the door was thrown open, the sable page glided in so stealthily, so silently, so speedily, that no spectre could have passed by more imperceptibly, and thus, ere the door was even closed again and secured within, the lithe and subtle Rao was ensconced behind the heavy window-curtains of that chamber where the atmosphere was warm and perfumed.

CHAPTER XI

HORROR

We must break off the thread of our narrative for a short space, while we record an episode of horror that characterized the same night, and the same hour of the night, as the incidents contained in the preceding chapter.

For it was while the dark-coloured barouche was yet rolling along from Hyde Park toward its place of destination, that a man was advancing stealthily down a narrow lane skirting one of the churchyards on the northern suburb of London.

This man was roughly dressed in the garb of a sailor; but the broad brim of his hat shaded a countenance the expression of which no mortal language can properly delineate. That countenance was ghastly pale, but the eyes were wild and bloodshot, the lips were cracked and bleeding, as if with a horrible thirst, and the workings of the features were of a nature that seemed to denote an awful struggle in the mind between a poignant anguish and an infernal ferocity. Agony and horror were combined in that dread expression which was stamped upon the man's ghastly countenance, and as every step brought him nearer and nearer to the gate of the churchyard, his anguish seemed to grow more intense, his horror more profound, and the tempest which raged in his soul became the more excruciating, the more awful in its violence, the more tremendous in its absorbing potency.

It seemed as if the irresistible hand of some infernal destiny was hurrying the wretch along to the performance of a task whence his soul, appalled and horror-stricken, shrank with a fearful loathing. That agony which convulsed his countenance and which bathed him in perspiration was

the awful index of a frightful struggle waged by his mind against the doom that he was thus obeying; it was the better nature of the man battling with the hellish instincts of the fiend.

Under the rough jacket which hung loosely upon him, the man carried a spade. Once or twice he paused in the midst of the lane, tossed the implement away from him with a movement of the deepest disgust, and then appeared to experience a feeling of satisfaction at having thus rid himself of a thing which he evidently regarded with as much horror and aversion as if it were a coiling, writhing, clammy serpent.

But scarcely had he cast the shovel away when his destiny seized upon him again, grasped him as with an invisible hand of iron, forced him to stoop down and pick up the implement once more, and then hurried him along the lane, despite of every wild, desperate, maddening effort which the man made to throw off the thraldom that some supernal and indomitable influence thus exercised over him.

The moon was shining faintly and feebly; and on reaching the churchyard gate, the man paused. He leaned against the railing, he buried his face in his hands, he wept bitterly, bitterly. Profound sobs convulsed him, as if the very fountains of his heart's agony were completely broken up; and the strong, muscular form of that man writhed like a stricken reptile beneath the invisible influence that had fastened its accursed spell upon him.

Yes, the moon was shining faintly and feebly and the tombs in the churchyard wore a ghastly aspect. Gray in the sickly gleaming appeared the old church itself, the windows shining with a leaden dimness, and deep was the shade in the arched entrance and in the angles and nooks formed by the projecting buttresses. So black and dark, too, were the intervals between the tombstones in the cemetery that it seemed as if every one was a yawning abyss which had opened, and that the entire churchyard was an assemblage of innumerable gulfs the edges whereof were pinnacled with the monuments of the dead.

And solemn, profoundly solemn was the silence which reigned in that place. The stillness was indeed that of death, and the night air was fraught with the icy coldness of the tomb. 'Twas a silence only too well calculated to

enhance the desolation of heart experienced by any homeless outcast and wandering wretch who might happen to pause for a moment there to lean against the gate and rest his weary limbs, and it was a chill that could not fail to pierce into the very marrow of his bones.

And over the gate bent the man whom a hideous destiny seemed to have impelled thither; over the gate he bent, looking around upon the churchyard with eyes the haggard wildness and despairing frenzy of which were further proofs of the poignant anguish that wrung his soul. He clung to the gate, and yet he would have been overjoyed to hasten away. With an iron tenacity did he seem to grasp those railings, and yet he would have given worlds, had he possessed them, to be enabled to throw off the spell that was upon him and flee with precipitation from that spot. But he was not his own master: his better inclinations urged him in one direction, his ferocious instincts impelled him in another. The intelligence of the man was warring against the unnatural sensation of the fiend, and the latter influence was triumphant.

Yes, a spell of a tremendous and appalling nature was now upon the unhappy man; and, with convulsing limbs, a form bathed from head to foot in the sweat of his agony, eyes glaring with ferocious wildness, features working horribly, and foam oozing from the tongue and speckled with the blood that came from the cracked lips, in this wretched, unnatural, awful plight it was that the man suddenly climbed the gate and leaped over into the churchyard.

And now, instead of either keeping in the path or striking off into the intervals between the tombs and the graves, the man studiously avoided touching the ground at all with his feet; but he walked from stone to stone, stepping easily from one to another when they were close, and leaping the intervening space with a sure foot and an unerring dexterity when they were farther apart. From time to time he paused and listened; then, if the sound of a footstep in the lane happened to meet his ear, he would throw himself flat upon some monumental stone and there lie until all was still again. But if it were the barking of a dog which his ear caught, a frightful trembling would come over him as he flung his form on the nearest horizontal stone; and there

would he lie in convulsive writhings until the menacing sound was heard no more.

In all and every case, however, was he careful to avoid touching the ground with his feet. From tomb to tomb, from stone to stone, would he pass or leap with celerity; but such was his evident horror of even suffering his foot to brush against a blade of the grass that grew between the graves, that if ever he happened to stumble while thus strangely making his way through the churchyard, an ejaculation of fright would escape his lips and his whole frame would tremble with a mortal terror.

And all this time the man hugged the spade beneath the rough garment which he wore. But if now and then he fancied that amidst the twilight gloom he beheld a human shape gliding stealthily along in the shade of the wall or through the labyrinth of the tombs, or if his disordered imagination deluded him with the idea that a head was suddenly thrust up from behind one of the perpendicular stones, then how every nerve and fibre in the frame of the unhappy wretch thrilled with excruciating apprehension, how every vein tingled with the blood that suddenly ran like lightning there, but only to flow cold and icy to the heart!

But had this man any fixed purpose in thus wandering over the graves, making the memorials of the dead his stepping-stones, and carefully avoiding the cold clay which covered the coffins or lay between the resting-places of perished humanity? And in thus pursuing his path, had he any definite spot in view? Was there any special destination which he was endeavouring to reach?

We know not. Certain, however, it is that all on a sudden the man paused, not on account of any sound filling him with terror or making him anxious to escape observation, but in apparent obedience to some instinctive feeling telling him that this was the place, or under the guidance of some spell that made him halt by its own mystic influence in the same way that it at other times urged him on.

And the spot where the man had thus halted was where the mound of a newly made grave appeared. The large lumps of damp clay were heaped rudely and negligently up; no trouble had been bestowed upon shaping the grave, no turf had been set over the elevation which marked the

resting-place of a new victim to the maw of all-destroying death. Ah! doubtless it was some poor, friendless creature, male or female, that had been buried there; and the sexton's fee was too small to induce him to bestow any care upon a task for which he was so indifferently remunerated.

This grave lay near a flat tombstone; and kneeling upon the latter, the man felt carefully, slowly, and cautiously all around and about that newly made grave. To this portion of his task did he devote upwards of five minutes, not contenting himself with merely passing his hand everywhere near and over the grave, but likewise examining the spot with keen and penetrating looks.

At length his finger encountered some object from which his touch recoiled at first, while a cold tremor passed over his frame and the perspiration burst forth once more upon his brow; but, speedily recovering his presence of mind, he again felt cautiously and delicately for that object which his finger had ere now encountered. Again he touched it; he raised it gently up. It was only a wire which was stretched over that spot, and which passed through the roughly piled mound of damp clay that marked the new-made grave.

Yes, it was only a wire; but how delicately, how cautiously, how timidly did the man touch it. Simply raising it half an inch from the ground, neither pulling it one way nor the other, equally careful not to shake it, he suffered it to lie over the finger which he had thrust underneath it. Then, taking a pair of scissors from his pocket, he cut the wire in twain; and the moment this was done, he appeared to breathe more freely.

Following the course of the wire in one direction from the point where it was cut, the man clipped it asunder again at a distance of about three yards; and then, following the wire in the other direction, he treated it in a similar manner. Thus the pieces of wire that now remained in the vicinity of the grave were isolated from the rest; and the man, tearing them up without fear, twisted them around his hand into a skein or ball, and hurled them to a distance.

And now, as if seized with a sudden paroxysm of activity, he grasped his spade and began to dig at the grave as if he had a particular task to perform in a given time, life or death depending upon the issue. And to the accomplishment of this labour did the spell-struck mortal strain his whole nerve

and fibre, dashing the spade down deep into the soil, tossing up the huge lumps with a marvellous speed, — in fine, hollowing out the grave much more speedily than a practised sexton could possibly have done it.

The perspiration poured off him like large drops of rain; the glow of heat into which the toil threw him appeared to animate him with increased ardour, heightening into a perfect fever of the blood, and expanding into a delirium of the brain. Madly, madly did he ply the spade; his efforts were almost superhuman. Never was implement worked with such marvellous rapidity, never was grave hollowed out with such wondrous speed. A horrible enthusiasm seemed to be inspiring the wretch in his loathsome work; he grew joyous, happy, intoxicated with triumph, and the nearer his labour brought him to the end of his task, the more delirious became his feelings, the more maddening the excitement of his soul.

At length the spade struck upon the coffin, and an ejaculation of frenzied ecstasy burst from the man's lips, as if that dull, hollow, sinister sound had just made the most delicious music to his ears. Through the deep obscurity that prevailed in the depth of the grave, his eyes shone with the ferocious and lurid glare of a tiger crouched in a cavern or concealed in a jungle; and as those terrible looks flashed through the gloom, they might have been taken for corpse-lights shedding their ominous beams over the spot where a hideous desecration was in progress.

The spade had speedily cleared away all the soil which lay upon the lid of the coffin, and now the man addressed himself to the task of raising the coffin itself. This was speedily accomplished; for the wretch's arms appeared to be made of iron, capable of dashing aside any obstacle, competent to the performance of every task. Soon, therefore, was the coffin raised to a perpendicular position in the grave; and when once it was thus lifted up on one end, the man had no trouble in dragging it forth from the grave.

Surely it was a giant's arm that thus handled the coffin, as if it were a thing of no weight, or else, surely some fiend must have lent his power to that wretch whose mischief or whose vengeance, whose malignity or whose avarice, was now about to be gratified by the complete desecration of the dead's last home.

For at a moment when the moon was shining more brightly than it had hitherto done this night, when the stillness was more solemn around, and when the old church stood out in a finer relief against the deep inky sky beyond, at this moment was it that the man tore off the lid of the coffin which he had exhumed.

And this portion of his task caused but little trouble, for it was a poor, miserable coffin, a paltry box of thin deal boards hurriedly nailed together and daubed over with a single coat of black paint. For a moment the man seemed disappointed, and half-inclined to throw back the coffin into the grave and cover it with the soil again; but this hesitation vanished almost immediately, and the diabolical instinct which impelled the wretch once more became dominant.

Away went the lid, then, the shroud was torn aside, and the rays of the moon shone out with all their power at that moment upon the countenance of the corpse.

But, O God! what a hideous ejaculation burst from the lips of the man as his eyes fell upon the marble features thus exposed to view. Staggering back, he was on the point of falling into the grave beneath the weight of the sudden consternation which had seized upon him; but, with a new and desperate impulse, he sprang forward, he fell upon his knees by the side of the coffin, he steadied himself so as to contemplate the countenance of the corpse with an earnest scrutiny, and thus did he remain, the living looking into the face of the dead for upward of a minute.

And in the space of that minute what varied thoughts flashed through the brain of the monster-man, — appalling fears lest the suspicion which had struck him should prove correct, wild hopes that imagination had deceived him, then a horrible anxiety to receive a confirmation of these hopes, or else to know the worst, until at length he could neither hope nor doubt any longer; for the suspicion was confirmed, the features were those which they had struck him to be, the marble countenance, so serene in death, was the same which he had loved and caressed in life.

Then, with a wild shriek and an unearthly yell, did the wretch spring from his knees; then, with another and still more rending outburst of mortal anguish, did he throw up his arms in mingled horror and despair; and, as it was precisely at this moment that the moon became all on a sudden

obscured with a cloud, the miserable man fancied that the darkness of hell was closing in upon him, and, with a long, hideous moan, he sank down on his knees again.

His hands were clasped, but his arms hung down like those of the dead. Not a moan, not a sigh now escaped his lips. He was motionless, speechless. But thoughts of appalling contexture were filling his brain with harrowing sensations, as if scorpions were revelling there. Unnerved and physically paralyzed was he by the fearfulness of the scene in which he was playing one part and the dead another, with the spectral churchyard as the theatre of the infernal drama.

His tongue clave to the roof of his mouth with a deadly thirst, and a mortal terror now seized upon him as the night put forth all its inky blackness to veil both moon and stars and draw its sable curtain down unto the very lowest confines of the horizon. Slowly did a sense of approaching lethargy steal upon him; his form, as he knelt on the humid soil, gave way gradually like an image of snow which is melting at the base, and he eventually sank down by the side of the coffin, deprived of consciousness and lost to every earthly feeling.

An hour elapsed, during which this mysterious swoon lasted, the entranced living slumbering by the side of the irrevocably departed dead.

Suddenly the man awoke, and as suddenly he started up. Springing to his feet, he threw wild and horrified looks around. The moon and stars were now shining forth once more, — shining upon the church, the tombs, and the marble countenance of the corpse. Thus was the wretch enabled to discover where he was, and that discovery itself was a mingled agony and terror.

In the space of a single moment, a moment which carried a myriad incidents through his brain, as a rocket with all its outshooting sparks and countless coruscations sweeps through the air, in that brief space, we say, did he live over again, with a frightfully vivid distinctness, every incident and every thought of the tremendous sacrilege which he had ere now achieved toward the resting-place of the dead.

Yes, and amidst those horrifying reminiscences which thus swept through his brain was one which rent him anew with unspeakable agony, which concentrated in itself all the anguish of the rack and the most fiendish implements of

the torture-rooms of old, and which made him bend and writhe and convulse as if he were flayed alive.

Then, as this intolerable anguish at length found means of giving expression to itself in words, he sank down once more upon his knees by the side of the coffin, exclaiming, "My wife! my wife!"

And he burst into a flood of the bitterest weeping.

Yes, it was his wife, his own wife, whom the monster-man had thus exhumed, — that wife of whose death he was ignorant, whom he had hoped to meet again in the land of the living, but whom he had thus encountered face to face in the cold damp realm of the dead.

Those tears relieved him. The nature which had been changed by awful influences into a demon-like ferocity was softened; the disposition which no ordinary causes had converted into a morbid and loathsome brutality was touched. Over the coffin he threw himself, upon the marble features of the dead he printed his caresses and dropped his tears; and the kisses were burning with the memory of ancient love, and the tears were scalding with the anguish and woe of the present moment.

And, O cruel contrast! cold, cold as the grave whence that stiff, stark form had been snatched, was the countenance whereon those kisses were fastened and those tear-drops rained down; and the man murmured, as he paused and gazed steadfastly on the features of the corpse, "Thou didst perish through starvation! Yes, it is too apparent, for thy cheeks must have been fleshless and sunken even before death laid his finger upon them. And, moreover, this is a pauper's coffin: there's no possibility of mistaking about that. Even into the grave does misery pursue its victim."

The man stopped and remained silent for upward of a minute, during which he still kept his eyes fixed upon the countenance of the dead.

"But thou shalt be revenged, my poor murdered wife," he resumed, at length. "Yes, the atrocious system under which the poor of this country live and die hath murdered thee. Thou art one of the myriad million victims whom that system hath already sent, starved or broken-hearted, to untimely graves. Oh, curses, curses, hell's curses upon such a system! But thou shalt be revenged, I repeat, yes, by the living God! thou shalt be revenged. For I will prove a

terror to society, to that society whose system has driven me to despair. The Deity made me a man: 'tis the world which has made me a monster. And a monster will I remain, performing the deeds of one, carrying horror into the bosom of this society whose outcast I am, striking terror into the soul of that community which cherishes a few favoured ones so fondly and leaves the millions to starve, to rot, to die. And our little ones — oh, I will seek them out, I will find them," exclaimed the man, continuing to apostrophize the corpse in a tone of concentrated wildness mingled with a savage triumph. " It will not be a difficult task: either grovelling in the workhouse, or perishing on a door-step, or crouched up in a street-corner, or else, perhaps, in a felon's gaol, shall I find them. Yes, those are the places for the outcast working man to look for his lost children," continued the unhappy being, his voice now expressing a penetrating bitterness; " those are the receptacles into which English civilization thrusts the innocent, unoffending, famishing babes of the poor. O God, how long shall this system last, how long, how long? "

And covering his face with his hands as he knelt by the side of the coffin, the doomed wretch remained for upwards of a minute absorbed in the profoundest reverie.

Suddenly he started up. A last kiss he imprinted upon the countenance of the corpse, a last tear he dropped, and a last look threw on the marble features; then, as if hurried along by a frantic desire to restore the coffin to its place and the grave to its propriety with all possible despatch, he addressed himself to the task with all his zeal and all his energy.

Carefully, however, did he resign that pauper-coffin to its last home; and when it was once more lodged at the bottom of the grave, he threw back the earth with an incredible quickness. In half an hour the labour was completed, the rising mound of the grave was remodelled with care, and the man, shouldering his spade, looked grimly around him.

No human form was visible, no eyes met his own. The silver light of the moon and stars was now shining serenely, too serenely for such a world of oppression, injustice, turpitude, and woe.

Once more mounting upon the tombstones, the monster-man took his departure from the churchyard in the same

way that he had entered it; and on gaining the lane in safety, he appeared to breathe with a comparative ease and freedom that he had not known for some hours past.

We shall not accompany him farther upon the present occasion; neither shall we inquire whither he himself is going, nor who he is, nor how he came to be the victim of so appalling a doom as that which hurried him on to the hideous proceedings of this dread night of churchyard desecration. No, we shall not now stop to examine into all this; but the reader may rest assured that he will soon fall in with this strange and terrible being once more, and then perhaps —

But let us not anticipate aught of the horrors which we may be called upon to reveal concerning the monster-man.

CHAPTER XII

LORD FLORIMEL AND THE UNKNOWN SIREN

RETURN we now to the boudoir of love, darkness, and mystery, that chamber with the perfumed atmosphere, the genial warmth, and the luxurious furniture, to which Florimel was thus introduced a second time.

The sable page, be it remembered, was concealed in that room, his presence being utterly unsuspected and undreamed of on the part of his noble master and that lady whose wantonness had recourse to such strange expedients in order to blend self-gratification with safety.

And upon the sofa which stood near the table was this impassioned woman reclining in the arms of her paramour of a few hours; and, although his eyes were unable to penetrate through the Cimmerian darkness of that chamber, yet did his fancy, his ardent, glowing, and fervid fancy, depict all the charms of his companion, as, now half-naked, and intoxicated with love, she pressed her voluptuous form against his own. With the eager eyes of his imagination he sought, as it were, to trace her entire person through the darkness, to finish that exciting picture of which his sensations already furnished him with so many delicious particulars, until his impassioned fancy could conceive all that was tempting and overpoweringly seductive in the contours of that fine person which was abandoned so completely to his embrace. He saw her, then, with his mental vision, he saw her, with the burning looks of his imagination, half-divested of her apparel, glowing as a bacchanal, and amorous as a bayadere, her long, glossy, silken hair flowing over the shoulders of such fluid shape and so plump and warm to the touch, her eyes half-closing, her cheeks flushing, and her lips moist and red as they bestowed and received devouring

caresses, her bosom heaving, with protracted sighs of pleasure, like the long slow swell of the ocean after a storm, her white arms thrown up and embracing his neck, with the hands joined behind his head, and her whole person yielding to the delicious languor and the sensuous abandonment of the ardour of love.

All this did the young nobleman fancy, or, rather, in this manner did his imagination enable him to complete the glowing picture of what he already felt or knew. But in reality he could see not that woman who even in the darkness was able to assert the power of a fascination superior to even the most lascivious looks; but he could feel her splendid form as it vibrated to his pressure, his hand would wander freely over all its rich contours, and the effect was the same as if from her person there exhaled a fragrance which stole upon the senses with the influence of a delicious inebriation. Oh, irresistible indeed was the power of that intoxicating perfume; and the image of Pauline was as completely drowned in the cup of ambrosia of which he was now drinking so deeply as ever the memory of the bacchanalian reveller was steeped in the oblivion of the brimming bowl.

And all this time, shrouded in the same impenetrable darkness which veiled the Unknown Lady from the eyes of her paramour, was Rao concealed in the boudoir of love and mystery.

"Dearest Gabriel," said the mistress of that voluptuous retreat, at length breaking a silence which had lasted for a considerable time, but during which the amorous dalliance had not ceased, "dearest Gabriel, you know that I love you, otherwise I should not have sought this second interview with you. Tell me, Gabriel, do you think that I love you?"

"Yes, dearest lady, I am certain that you must have an affection for me," responded the young nobleman, upon whose lips the ardour of her caresses yet seemed to glow and in whose veins the transfusion of her own impassioned feelings was yet burning.

"It is indeed true, my Gabriel, that I love you," said the Unknown, in the deepest pathos and most moving tones of her fluid voice; "and it is because I love you that I am anxious to afford you any proof of this affection, — any proof, I mean, that lies within my power."

"You are kind-hearted and generous, my sweet friend," said Florimel; "but the only favour you can possibly show me is the disclosure of your name and the revelation of your countenance."

"Not now, not now," exclaimed the lady, lavishing upon her paramour the tenderest caresses, as if for the purpose of coaxing him away from a topic which displeased her. "But the time may not be far distant when I shall be enabled to place that amount of confidence in you, Gabriel —"

"Ah! think not, my beautiful companion," interrupted the young nobleman, "that I am influenced by any sentiment of idle curiosity. No; I should not have made the slightest allusion to the avowal of your name had I reflected for another moment, because it is only your countenance which I wish revealed. I care not who you may be; for I am confident that you are handsome, splendidly handsome! Oh, such frenetic passions as these which burn in your bosom can only be associated with a loveliness well adapted to inspire the same in return."

"You shall gaze upon my countenance soon, Gabriel, you shall know who I am, you shall become the depositor of all my secrets in due time," murmured the mysterious siren, as she pressed herself more closely to her noble paramour. "But in the meantime tell me if there be anything which I can do to testify my love toward you and rivet your friendship, if it be impossible to win your love in return. Tell me, Gabriel, whether my fortune can serve you; for I am rich, very rich, and cheerfully would I place a large portion of my wealth at your disposal."

"Generous-hearted friend, as liberal as you are loving," said the young nobleman, straining her the more closely to his breast, "I return you a thousand thanks for your proposals; but I have no need to avail myself of them. For I also am rich, as perhaps you are aware; indeed you must be, since you are more or less acquainted with me."

"Ah! my beloved Gabriel," murmured the lady, in a tone trembling with emotion, "I know that you are rich now, but is not your fortune menaced? Is not your position threatened?"

Florimel started with a convulsive paroxysm as the lady breathed those questions in his ears; for who could she

possibly be that she was thus intimate with his most private affairs? Who was she, that the important secrets of his present position were so fully known to her?

"How learned you these circumstances?" he demanded, after a long pause, and in a voice which was ominously changed.

"Do not question me upon that head, Gabriel," said the lady. "Even were you to know who I am, you would not glean from such knowledge the source of my present information concerning the posture of your affairs. And if I have ere now alluded to them, it is because I love you, Gabriel, because I feel deeply, deeply interested in all that concerns you, and because I may perhaps be enabled to render you a service in this matter."

"Oh, how mysterious art thou, incomprehensible being!" exclaimed the young nobleman. Then, bending his face down to her own, he covered the warm cheeks and the moist lips with devouring kisses. "Surely thou art some creature of a grade superior to that of ordinary mortals," he murmured, in a tone of mingled compliment and gratitude; "perhaps some fairy who hath taken a fancy to so humble an individual as myself, perhaps some demi-goddess, descended from your empyrean throne to teach the pleasures of paradise to an earthly lover. Oh, my unknown charmer, my mysterious friend, comprehensible in nothing save the transcendent witchery of thy seductiveness and the irresistible allurement of thy fascinations, how wonderfully is my spirit drawn toward thee by gratitude, by admiration, by a sense of Elysian enjoyment, almost by a feeling of love!"

But as Florimel suffered these last words to fall murmuringly from his lips, his heart smote him with a severe and poignant pang; for the image of Pauline was instantaneously conjured up to his mental view. And in order to flee away, as it were, from the deeply mournful looks of silent reproach which the image of that fair being appeared to be fixing upon him, the faithless Florimel wound his arms still more completely around the half-naked form of the Unknown Lady; and plunging, as it were, into the absorbing tide of the continuous and almost frenzied caresses which she now lavished upon him, he forgot Pauline, he forgot his vows, his pledges, his grief at her late conduct, and all, everything did he

forget, while abandoning himself to the transports of the present occasion.

"Thou art adorable, dearest lady," murmured Florimel, after a long pause. "Oh, promise me that we shall meet soon again. But wherefore should we separate at all? Surely you must be your own mistress, as I am my own master," continued the young noble, hurried along by the infatuation excited by all the influences which were now operating upon his susceptible nature, — the sense of ineffable enjoyment, the mystery which enveloped alike the companion and the place of his pleasures, the relief which his feelings, wounded as they were by the conduct of Pauline, now experienced in the dulcet society of his amorous Unknown, and the generous proposals which she had made to place her fortune at his command.

"What do you mean, Gabriel?" she inquired, in a low tone that was still trembling with sensations of bliss mellowed into a voluptuous languor. "Supposing that you were your own master, which you are not, and supposing that I avowed myself my own mistress, as I really am, then what would you have me infer?"

"Before I answer you, mysterious being," said the young nobleman, "tell me wherefore I am not my own master."

"Because you love Pauline Clarendon," responded the lady, with something like the bitterness of a jealous rivalry in her tone; "and you confessed that much to me ere now, while we were journeying hither in the carriage."

"But you are charming enough, as I am confident you are sufficiently handsome also, to wean the least fickle heart from the object of its adoration elsewhere," murmured Lord Florimel, scarcely knowing what he said, so intoxicated was he with the feelings of bliss that enwrapped all his senses, and so completely was he enthralled by the magic of the seductiveness and the luscious wantonness of the caresses which were brought to bear upon him.

"Then do you mean to assure me that it is possible you can ever forget Pauline Clarendon and transfer your love to me?" asked the Unknown, with the breathless anxiety of suspense in her musical voice, while at the same time Florimel felt her heart palpitate rapidly and violently beneath the glowing bosom which he was pressing.

"By Heaven! I am almost tempted to swear that I love

thee already," exclaimed Florimel. "Oh, if I could only see thy countenance, and if it should prove as handsome as I have in imagination depicted it, then, oh, then thy triumph would be indeed complete, thy victory would be accomplished, irresistible siren that thou art!"

"I will not reveal my countenance to thee yet, Gabriel," was the response, delivered in a mild but firm tone. "Nevertheless, I can assure thee that it is handsome, very handsome, as handsome as thou thyself hast imagined it to be. There, even now as thy hand playeth caressingly with my hair, thou canst feel that it is long, luxuriant, and glossy. Now pass that hand over my forehead, and thou canst perceive that it is broad, smooth, and as if polished. My cheeks are plump and yet soft; and thou mayst judge whether they could glow thus warmly unless the hues of a vigorous health were upon them. Then my teeth, thou canst feel that they are even in nature's arrangement, and perfect in number; not one is deficient, and thou mayst judge whether such teeth must not be of pearly whiteness and spotless purity. And my breath, oh, thou hast already drunk it in as if it were fragrant —"

"Yes, balmy as the breath of May, when the primroses and the violets are appearing," murmured Florimel, lulled, as it were, into such a voluptuous languor that he would have made no effort to resist the siren even if she had endeavoured to steal from him his immortal soul, were such a theft possible.

"Then you are fully convinced that I must be as beautiful as your imagination has already depicted me?" continued the unknown charmer, whose seductive influence was subtle as a poison circulating rapidly in the veins, and sure as an opiate stealing upon the senses.

"I am confident that thou art as ravishingly beautiful — no, as superbly handsome in countenance," replied the infatuated Florimel, "as thou art magnificent in the Diana-like proportions of thy form. Oh, wherefore hast thou cast thine invisible chains around me, irresistible enchantress that thou art? For even now, despite of a profound sense of duty prompting me to start from thine arms and give back my allegiance to the image of the lovely but capricious Pauline, yes, despite of that better feeling which stirs within me like a remorse, I am unable to shake off the manacles

and the fetters which thou hast riveted upon me. Well, then, be thou Satan in a woman's shape, or an angel divested for the moment of thy glory, be thou a fiend sent in disguise to tempt me on to the gulf of perdition, or a heavenly being teaching me the paths of Elysian enjoyment, whichever thou art, thou hast triumphed over me. I am thine, unredeemably thine, body and soul, heart and hand, intellect and sense — oh, yes, I am thine, I am thine."

And the young nobleman, who was now worked up to a pitch of frenetic enthusiasm which placed him utterly beyond the mastership of his own thoughts, words, or actions, strained the seductive creature to his breast with all the violence of those impassioned feelings; and when he experienced all the responsive ardour of her own lascivious nature, he was like a man who, in mingled ecstasy and madness, would leap into a volcano's crater, grapple with a tiger, or perform any other equally rabid or desperate deed at the bidding of a woman's tongue.

"Now, Gabriel," said the Unknown Lady, satisfied that her empire over him was complete, and that this sway was as potent over his mind as over his faculties, as enthralling with regard to the sentiment as it was in respect to the sense, "and now, Gabriel, my own dearly beloved Gabriel," she resumed, in her deepest, sweetest, most melodious, and most touching tones, "you have abandoned yourself entirely unto me, body and soul; and I fear that you will repent to-morrow of the rashness with which the pledge has been given."

"No, by Heaven! such will not prove the case," exclaimed Florimel, almost indignant at the suspicion; and then, such was his infatuation, he broke forth into the most passionate entreaties that the Unknown Lady would repose implicit confidence in him.

"Yes, I do believe you, my Gabriel," she said, at length, when the powers of language were exhausted by him in glowing protestations and fervid pledges; "and now I will ask you what you meant by the question which you put to me ere now, and which demanded wherefore we should separate at all?"

"I meant, dearest lady," replied Florimel, "that either as my mistress or as my wife must you henceforth be the companion of my existence."

"As your mistress, or as your wife," repeated the lady, with the slow deliberation of a musing tone. "Ah! it were more fitting that I should be your mistress, because I am some years older than you; but my pride, my vanity, my reputation, in fine, all other motives, urge me to become your wife. Tell me, then, Florimel, tell me, whether you will marry me, whether you will lead me to the altar and bestow thy name upon me?"

"I will, I will, if it will make thee happy and secure thee altogether to me," exclaimed the young nobleman.

"And in return," said the lady, with a rapid utterance, "I will undertake to save you, Gabriel, — yes, save you from the perils which now threaten you. I will save your fortune, I will save your peerage, and this lawsuit, which has already been commenced against you, will I crush in the very bud."

"My God! who are you, dearest and most incomprehensible of women?" exclaimed the young nobleman, renewed amazement breaking in somewhat upon the infatuation and enthusiasm which the mysterious lady had succeeded in exciting in his soul.

"No matter at present who I am," she responded, instantaneously redoubling the fond ardour of her caresses and winning him back into the mystic halo and intoxicating influence of her Circean fascinations. "You have declared that you will marry me, Gabriel, but I must give you time to ponder upon this pledge. Nay, I will rather put it in the light of a condition which I stipulate. And that condition is summed up in the words: Make me your wife, and I will stifle the lawsuit which otherwise must inevitably ruin you in respect to fortune and despoil you of your rank. But as I am not vain nor foolish enough to suppose that you will experience toward me to-morrow precisely the same rapturous devotion with which you bless, honour, and rejoice me to-night, and as I am well aware, then, that the fulfilment or the refusal of the condition which I have laid down are alternatives which can only be the result of calm deliberation, I am about to describe to you the means by which you may communicate with me at any time, should you wish to do so."

"And those means," cried Florimel, eagerly. "What are they?"

"A simple intimation to your own solicitor, Mr. Cresswell, that you have made up your mind to propose an amicable settlement of the matter at issue."

"Then you are acquainted with my solicitor? You must know him, and he must know you," exclaimed Florimel, once more seized with the wildest surprise. "Nay, he must even be in communication with you. Or else how could a simple intimation of such a nature as the one you have suggested reach your ears so readily, unless through him?"

"Most solemnly do I assure you, Gabriel," responded the lady, her voice showing that she was smiling as she spoke, "that I am not only altogether unacquainted with Mr. Cresswell, your attorney, but that I have never seen him in my life, at least to my knowledge."

"Then how can anything which I may say to him reach your ears?" demanded Florimel, more and more bewildered by the turn which the discourse was thus taking.

"Must not such an intimation as I have supposed you to be inclined to make sooner or later, must it not, I ask, be communicated into other channels?" said the lady.

"Ah! I comprehend," cried Florimel. "Yes, truly: an intimation from me that I am anxious to settle matters amicably must of necessity travel into the enemy's camp. Oh, is it possible, dear lady, that you are in any way connected with my foes?"

"Far from it; they do not know me," was the prompt answer, delivered in a tone of confidence. "But wherefore should you seek to penetrate into my sources of information, since you must comprehend by this time that I am a being involved in mystery and shrouded by a veil which the hand of curiosity cannot possibly draw aside until the day, the hour, and the minute shall come when I choose to give my permission. Now rest assured, Gabriel, that I can aid you in your present difficulty, and do not blind yourself to the fact that it is unsurmountable on your part. Your adversary will inevitably triumph if you trust the question to the issue of a law-process; but you shall triumph, Gabriel, if you accede to the condition I have laid down. And should you hesitate, — which you will do, I am fully aware, — should you remain undecided for even weeks and months, and then, in the long run, find yourself compelled to fall back upon the succour which I propose to render available on your behalf,

in such a case, I say, fear not to appeal to me through the medium I have suggested. Imagine not that it has become too late for me to aid you, or that my sentiments toward you have undergone a change. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, my beloved and mysterious friend," exclaimed Lord Florimel. "Oh, fear not that I shall be long ere I adopt the means and follow the instructions which are to bring us together again, no more to separate."

"We shall see," murmured the lady, with a half-suppressed sigh; but it was evident that she did not experience the same confidence which the young nobleman entertained with regard to the strength of the impassioned ardour and the permanence of the fervid enthusiasm whereby he was now enthralled. "And now," she suddenly exclaimed, after a brief pause and in a tone of reviving cheerfulness, "and now, beloved Gabriel, for an hour of bliss and Elysian joy in each other's arms and on that couch — "

But her further utterance was drowned in the billing murmurs of the kisses which Lord Florimel fastened upon her lips, and which she gave back with all the intoxicating lubricity of her ripe and luscious mouth.

A clock, apparently belonging to some adjacent church or chapel, proclaimed the hour of four in the morning, when the Unknown Lady started from the arms of Florimel, whom she thus abruptly awakened from a dreamy repose which had stolen voluptuously over him.

"What, is it time to separate?" he exclaimed.

"Yes; hasten, dear Gabriel, delay not, I beseech thee," returned the lady.

He immediately complied with her wishes; and in a few minutes they had both resumed their apparel, in the utter darkness which continued to pervade that boudoir of love, of mystery, and of a perfumed atmosphere.

"And now, my beloved Gabriel, thou wilt submit to the precaution which is so imperatively necessary?" said the Unknown, throwing into her voice all the winning charm and seductiveness of her melodious intonations.

"Yes, cheerfully do I submit to anything which inspires thee with confidence in me," returned the young nobleman, upon whose senses and faculties the influence of a profound and an engrossing rapture was still maintaining its empire.

The lady murmured some endearing words, while she carefully fastened a silk handkerchief over Florimel's eyes; then, giving him his hat, she led him from the room. The door she left open behind her, and thus Rao experienced no difficulty in following close behind, for the passage and the staircase were still involved in a darkness deep as that which fell upon Egypt.

The door at the foot of the staircase was thrown open by the lady, who hurried Florimel along without pausing to close it; and the sable page therefore found every facility offered for his escape. But it was now of the utmost importance to him to reach Piccadilly before his master, so that, in case Florimel should inquire for him when arriving at home, he might not be missed. Accordingly, while the Unknown Lady was conducting her noble paramour along the gravel walk, Rao plunged rapidly but noiselessly amidst the evergreens, the position of which was dimly shadowed forth in the misty obscurity that had succeeded the light of moon and stars. In a few moments he gained the garden wall, which he climbed with the agility of a cat; and thus, favoured by the deep gloom, he fled unobserved from the vicinage of the place where he had listened to a discourse which had amazed him profoundly and to sighs of pleasure which had excited him strangely.

But he did not quit the neighbourhood of that mansion without having paused for a minute to study its salient features, as well as the darkness of the morning hour would permit; and he was enabled to observe enough to impress his mind with the positive conviction that he should not fail to recognize the place again.

At a short distance he was lucky enough to overtake a hackney-coach, which bore him back to Piccadilly in a little more than a quarter of an hour; and he arrived at home a few minutes before the vehicle containing Lord Florimel stopped at the door.

But, to return to that nobleman, we should observe that so soon as the lady had conducted him to the garden gate, she made him pause while she hurriedly repeated to him that condition upon which she was prepared to succour him in crushing his enemies; and she likewise reiterated the means he was to adopt in order to convey to her his desire to see her again, should he sooner or later resolve upon

agreeing to that condition and throwing himself entirely into her arms. Thus upwards of five minutes elapsed while the Unknown Lady was breathing her farewell words in Florimel's ears; and thus also was an opportunity unconciously afforded to the black page to achieve his successful escape from the mansion and its neighbourhood.

The mysterious siren now pressed Florimel's hands with impassioned fervour to her lips; then, opening the gate, she murmuringly bade him farewell. At the same instant he was raised in the strong arms of the tall footman and thrust into the carriage; the door was banged, and the vehicle started off at a gallop.

Florimel removed the handkerchief from his eyes; and when he tried the windows, he found, as he had expected, that the wooden blinds were drawn up and that they were immovable. He then threw himself back in the luxurious barouche and gave way to his meditations, the joyous recollections of the past few hours' pleasure now rapidly mingling with feelings of bitter compunction and poignant remorse as the image of Pauline rose before his mental vision.

At length the barouche stopped, the door was opened, he leaped out, and the equipage was whirled away again with all the rapidity which two superb steeds were capable of exerting.

Florimel paused for a few moments to follow it with his eyes as it rushed glancingly along the rows of lamps which marked, as with a tracery of light, the descending and then ascending thoroughfare stretching away along the margin of one park and toward the entrance of another; and as the young nobleman stood gazing until the din of its wheels and its horses' hoofs were lost in the distance, he heaved a profound sigh as he thought of the temptations, the irresistible temptations, into which that departing carriage had this night borne him.

The door of his mansion stood open, and Rao was there to receive him.

"What, not in bed, my boy?" exclaimed Florimel, surprised to observe that his page was still up and dressed at that late hour, or, rather, early hour in the morning.

"I fancied that your lordship might perhaps need my attendance," said the sable youth, in his wonted quiet manner and without the least embarrassment or confusion in his looks.

"You are a good and grateful boy, Rao," said Lord Florimel, passing his hand with a caressing air of approval over the silken jetty hair of the page.

And Rao's slender form trembled in every fibre, quivered in every nerve, at his master's touch; and beneath the darkness of his skin, the blood glowed in deepest crimson in the flesh of his cheeks, while it boiled in his veins with the fury of some passion profoundly stirred.

"You tremble, Rao, you shiver," said Florimel, in a tone of commiseration. "You are evidently very cold, and this is all through sitting up to wait for me. Poor boy! Another time let the hall-porter perform his duty, nor should you undertake to do it for him."

"Oh, my lord, it has given me a heartfelt pleasure to sit up to-night," exclaimed the boy, in a thrilling tone.

"You are a good and grateful youth," repeated Florimel; "and I am more than ever rejoiced to think that I received you into my service."

"And each day, my lord, am I more rejoiced to think that I have entered it," returned Rao; but the strange significancy and ominous meaning which formed, as it were, an undercurrent in his tone, escaped the notice of Florimel.

"Well, give me my candle. I will dispense with your services to-night, or, as I should say, this morning," observed the nobleman. "And now betake yourself to rest, Rao, and another time don't sit up for me unless you like, my boy."

Thus speaking, Lord Florimel hastened to his own chamber, to dream of the Unknown Lady and Pauline, the joys of the mysterious boudoir and his own deep infidelity toward the virgin object of his purer and holier adoration.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BUCCANEERS

A MONTH had elapsed since Philip Ramsey, the resuscitated criminal, embarked at Liverpool on board a small vessel bound for New York.

He had quitted England only through dread of the threats which the outraged Earl of Desborough had levelled against him on that tremendous occasion when the incident of the portrait revealed the identity of Gustavus Wakefield, the sham West Indian, with Philip Ramsey, the resuscitated of the gallows.

On that occasion, as the reader will remember, the almost heart-broken Earl of Desborough had addressed himself in these terms to Ramsey: "Here are five hundred pounds for your use; and, by the living God, if you venture to remain in England, if you do not proceed in my carriage direct to Liverpool and thence depart without delay for America, I will show you no more mercy, but proclaim the fact of your existence to the world and set the bloodhounds of justice to hunt you to that destruction which you have escaped once."

These words rang in the ears of the wretched criminal throughout the journey from London to Liverpool. They seemed to pursue him like an anathema, and although he had many and cogent reasons to induce him to remain in England, yes, to remain in the land where he was every instant fearful of being recognized, he nevertheless felt as if a spell were urging him on to the fulfilment of the conditions imposed upon him by the earl. And thus was it that his terrors ruled him until he stood upon the deck of the *Firefly* schooner at Liverpool; and it was only when the vessel was putting out to sea that he began to reflect that he perhaps had yielded too

much to his alarm in thus suffering the earl's menaces to drive him into exile.

But it was then too late to amend the step he had taken, too late to retrace his way. He could not quit the vessel, now that she was fairly under way like a bird upon the wing; and he therefore resigned himself to the fate which forced him upon this voyage across the Atlantic, consoling himself, moreover, with the thought which flashed to his mind, that it would be alike safer and easier to negotiate for his full and complete pardon with those who, he well knew, were able to procure it, and whose influence he could command.

The vessel in which he had embarked was a schooner. It was small, but a fast sailer and an excellent sea-boat; and in the rough weather which was speedily encountered, it fully justified all the praises that the captain was wont to bestow upon his "craft." Fortunately for Ramsey, there was not a soul on board who had ever seen him before the occasion of his embarkation; nor did the remotest shadow of a suspicion exist that he was otherwise than what he professed to be, "Mr. Gustavus Wakefield, a merchant."

A month passed, we say, since the good schooner *Firefly* put out of the Mersey on her voyage to New York. During this interval, as we have likewise observed, she encountered some tempestuous weather; but she weathered it all, though somewhat impeded in her course by the adverse winds with which she had at times to contend. More than two-thirds of the distance was, however, accomplished by the expiration of the fourth week; and Ramsey had already laid down, in a methodical manner, the various plans which he intended to adopt on his arrival in the States, when an incident occurred which changed his position, his thoughts, and his schemes with a bewildering suddenness.

The extreme beauty of the weather had called Ramsey one morning from his hammock at an earlier hour than usual. He went upon deck as the sun was about to rise in all that splendour which is most irresistibly overpowering alike to the physical view and the mental conception, upon the broad expanse of ocean. Dark clouds of neutral tint covered the heavens, save in the eastern horizon; and there, in the spot whence the orb of day was to beam upon the world, the sky was of a sombre brown.

Reader, you have beheld the gradient flaming up of the red fire upon the stage of a theatre, — how gradually it appears and then rises behind the scenery, until it flames from wing to wing, and from floor to roof, involving the whole place in a blaze of mimic glory. If you have seen this effect of art, gentle reader, when well managed and in a spacious theatre, then may you form an idea of how the sun, on the morning whereof we are writing, rose behind those sombre brown clouds which lay piled up, mass upon mass and layer upon layer, in the eastern horizon. And first those clouds began to shine dimly, like a far-off conflagration; then, lighting up as if with an internal fire penetrating through them, they exchanged their sombre hues for glorious tints of the richest purple and the most vivid crimson. Soon the edges of the clouds kindled into borders of burnished gold, brightening into fringes of living fire; until the luminous effulgence spread farther and wider over the horizon, and thence rolled itself on and on in a sheet of dissolving light, which gilded at last the entire canopy of heaven.

And now this flood of living gold revealed a vessel in the distance, far ahead of the *Firefly*. Ramsey stood watching her as she seemed to be sailing through the blaze of luminous glory which thus bathed her. Presently the captain of the *Firefly*, who had been examining her with his glass for some time, exclaimed, in a tone of surprise, that she was " putting about." The mate of the schooner took the telescope, in his turn, and scrutinized the ship ahead, which was pronounced to be a large brig, and he likewise expressed amazement at the course which she was adopting. Ramsey now ventured to inquire the cause of the astonishment thus inspired by the movements of the stranger-vessel, and he was informed that she must either be distressed for provisions or else a pirate.

This latter alternative startled the resuscitated criminal; and the captain, observing the mingled alarm and surprise which Ramsey's countenance very naturally denoted, hastened to explain himself more fully.

" You see, Mr. Wakefield," he said, " it isn't right that that vessel should put about unless it wanted to speak with us. Now, there can't well be more than two reasons why it should. The fust is, that it's in distress for provisions,

and the second is, that it's a pirate on the lookout for any craft smaller than itself."

"And which do you think is the more probable?" asked Ramsey, his tone and manner both indicating a feeling of uneasiness.

The captain rolled his quid over from one side of his mouth to the other, gave a long and solemn stare at Ramsey, hitched up his breeches, and said, at length, "Well, sir, since you ax me for the candid truth, I'm blowed if I don't think she's a pirate, 'cos she don't put up no colours, and 'cos she looks too taut and neat about her rigging to have anything like famine a-ailin' the crew."

Having thus spoken, the captain proceeded to consult the mate; and the half-dozen sailors forming the rest of the crew of the *Firefly* speedily gathered near the spot where their officers were conversing. The opinion that the stranger-vessel was "no good," became general; and the schooner hoisted all canvas in order to run away from her. But the brig was enabled to bear rapidly down upon her, and when escape was seen to be impossible, the captain of the *Firefly* summoned his crew around him, distributed cutlasses and pistols, and made the following harangue:

"My friends, you can see as well as I can that there's somethink more than suspicious about that there brig which is dropping down upon us. It may be that she's commanded by some lubber as doesn't know when to haul up his colours so as to show a friendly aspeck; but I'm wery much afeard she'll turn out a wixen. In this case, my friends, we've on'y one dooty to perform, which is to defend the good ship *Firefly* till the wery last. And now, my men, mark me when I say that if this suspicious-looking craft does prove a rum customer, I for one will sooner go to Davy Jones's locker than haul down our colours or give up our owners' property to a parcel of buccaneering waggabones."

This speech was loudly applauded by the few brave fellows to whom it was addressed; but Ramsey stood at a distance, moody, silent, and with a sad foreboding in his mind, as he kept his eyes fixed upon the vessel which was so rapidly and so suspiciously bearing down upon the *Firefly*.

"Don't you mean to lend us a helping hand, Mr. Wake-

field? " demanded the captain, as he advanced and proffered a cutlass to Ramsey.

" Most certainly," was the prompt reply given by the resuscitated criminal, as he started from his reverie and seized the weapon which the hardy mariner handed him.

In a few minutes the brig came sufficiently near for the persons on the deck of the *Firefly* to observe certain appearances which were only too well calculated to set at rest any doubts that might have previously existed in respect to the character of that stranger-vessel and the intentions of its crew. For the men on the deck of the brig were all armed to the teeth; and in the bow a ferocious-looking fellow was planted with a grapnel ready to be flung into the rigging of the schooner.

" You perceive, my mates," said the captain of this latter vessel, " that our worst fears are confirmed and that we shall have a fight for it."

" Ay, ay, sir," exclaimed the men thus addressed; " but we ain't a-going to give up the *Firefly* without a blow in her defence."

Scarcely had the gallant crew of the trim little schooner given this response, when a man on board the brig was seen to flourish a speaking-trumpet as an indication that he was about to address the captain of the schooner.

" Now, then? " vociferated the latter, interrogatively.

" Haul down your colours, fling your weapons overboard, shorten sail, and send a couple of men on board of us as hostages of good faith on your part," exclaimed the individual with the speaking-trumpet on the deck of the stranger-vessel.

" Who are you? " demanded the captain of the *Firefly*.

" Ask no questions, but do as you're bid," was the imperious response.

" Then we'll resist you as a set of freebooting scoundrels," cried the captain of the schooner. Then, turning hastily toward his men, he said, " Treat them to a volley, my fine fellers."

And every pistol was simultaneously fired from the deck of the *Firefly*.

The volley was instantaneously returned by the pirates, who at the same time, by a skilful manœuvre, ran their brig

across the schooner's bows, and the grapnel fastened the two vessels together in a moment.

Then from the deck of the brig did half a dozen ruffian-looking fellows, all armed to the teeth, leap on board the schooner; and a terrible conflict ensued between the buccaneers and the gallant defenders of the *Firefly*. But what words can be found to express the astonishment of Philip Ramsey when he recognized the redoubtable Magsman and the ferocious Beggarman in the leaders of the boarding-party?

Dropping his cutlass in a moment, staggering back toward the mast, with a countenance as pale as death and limbs that trembled convulsively, the resuscitated criminal kept his eyes fixed with a wild vacancy upon the features of the two desperate men who were combating with irresistible valour at the head of their pirate followers. Too much occupied to take notice either of Ramsey or of the amazement and terror with which he was regarding them, the Magsman and the Big Beggarman fought as if the fate of the whole world depended upon the issue. Their lion-like courage was worthy of a better cause; and vainly did the crew of the *Firefly* contend against a boarding-party whose leaders seemed to be endowed with the strength of giants and the fury of demons.

The captain of the schooner was the first who succumbed, self-devoted to that duty which he owed his employers, who, comfortably seated in their counting-house in Liverpool, little thought at the moment how tremendous was the danger which had overtaken their vessel. And now upon the deck thereof flowed rivulets of blood, ghastly wounds were given and received, through the ambient air clanged the din of cutlasses and echoed the sharp crack of pistols, and for upwards of a quarter of an hour the combat raged with a frightful fury. But at the expiration of that time the result was no longer doubtful. The captain of the *Firefly* and two of his best men were slain, and the other four were speedily overpowered. Two perished fighting until the very last; the other two were made prisoners and carried on board the brig, where one died soon afterward from the wounds he had received. Thus was there but a single survivor of the crew of the *Firefly*, save and except the resuscitated criminal, Philip Ramsey.

It was not until the conflict was over and the schooner was completely in the hands of the buccaneers, that the Magsman and the Big Beggarman observed a tall, slender, genteel-looking man seated in the stern of the vessel, with his elbows resting upon his knees and his countenance buried in his hands. Naturally presuming that he must be some passenger, who had taken no part in the recent fray, they forthwith accosted him with some words of reassurance; but when he raised his head and revealed a face which, though ghastly pale, was not to be mistaken in any lineament and could not fail to be recognized in every feature, the two ruffians who had a moment before fought with such desperate valour shrank back in affright and gave vent to ejaculations of horror.

But neither their words nor their manner were observed at the moment by any of their comrades; for Watkins, Bradley, and the other freebooters were all busily employed in overhauling the stores and cargo of the *Firefly*; and the eager glance of scrutiny with which Ramsey's eyes swept the deck of the schooner and thence travelled as rapidly and as searchingly to the brig which lay alongside, showed him that the terror with which he had inspired the Magsman and the Beggarman was unnoticed elsewhere.

"My good friends," he accordingly said, in a hoarse, thick voice, "do not expose me, do not abandon me. I am indeed your old acquaintance — "

"Holy God! what does this mean?" exclaimed the Beggarman, clinging to his companion's arm for support and gazing in mingled horror and consternation upon the pale face of the resuscitated criminal.

"Don't be a fool, Stephen," said the Magsman. "It's a being of real flesh and blood, that's clear. But who are you, sir?" he demanded, fixing his looks with some degree of apprehension, despite the boldness of his words, upon Ramsey's features.

"I am he for whom you take me," answered Ramsey. "A combination of marvellous circumstances, too long to be related now, have snatched me from death, restored me, indeed, to life, made me a passenger on board this vessel — "

"And you are Philip Ramsey?" interrupted the Magsman, lowering his voice to a whisper as he put the question.

"I am, I am," responded the resuscitated, in a tone of

mingled despair and earnest appeal. "But do not expose me to your comrades, I conjure you. Whatever your present avocations may be, whatever your friends may be, I beg and implore that my secret may remain inviolable; for sooner than be taunted with the damnable ordeal through which I have passed, I would rather put an end at once to my wretched existence."

And the resuscitated criminal pointed over the ship's side to the calm water whereon it floated, as much as to intimate that the means of self-destruction lay within reach of suicidal steps.

"Don't be afraid, my friend, we sha'n't blab," said the Magsman. "But is it possible, after all, that — you know what I mean."

"Yes, is it possible?" echoed the Big Beggarman; and, as he spoke, he ventured to lay his hand upon Ramsey's arm to assure himself it was in truth a being of flesh and blood, and not a ghost, that thus wore the shape and semblance of the Aylesbury banker who had been executed in front of Newgate.

"My God! don't torture me with questions now," exclaimed Ramsey. "I am trembling from head to foot, lest any of your comrades should overhear your words or notice your gestures of astonishment. Will you control yourselves? Will you cast off that air of mingled mistrust and wonder?"

"To be sure we will," said the Magsman, seizing Ramsey's hand and giving it a hearty shake; "to be sure we will, now that we're satisfied of your being what you represent yourself. But, by God! anything more extraordinary than this — "

"I can't believe it yet," observed the Big Beggarman, still surveying Ramsey with the most unfeigned astonishment. "And yet, of course it is as you say."

"Besides, there's every feature the same," added the Magsman.

"At all events, you might as well give us a sign that you're really Philip Ramsey and not some brother of his'n," exclaimed the Big Beggarman, grinning at the lucid idea which he had just propounded as the most satisfactory means for the resuscitated to adopt in order to prove his own identity.

"My God! you will drive me mad," he cried, stamping his foot and clenching his hands with the fury of impatience. "At one moment you believe me, at another you are incredulous. But I am wrong, oh, I am wrong to be thus irritable," he exclaimed, his voice suddenly altering to a tone of contrition; "for I know that it is difficult for you to put faith in this marvel which has suddenly presented itself to your view. Let me, then, remind you of all our old transactions, the issue of the spurious coin, the imprisonment of Sir Richard Stamford in Thacker's Court, and the attempt which you made upon my life on the river, near Execution Dock," added Ramsey, fixing his eyes upon the countenance of the Big Beggarman.

"Enough! Enough!" exclaimed the latter; "I am convinced now. But you must tell us all about it, sir — "

"Yes, yes, when we have leisure and are alone together," interrupted Ramsey. "And now let me beseech you once more to retain my secret."

"It wouldn't do us no good to reveal it," observed the Big Beggarman. "Besides, we're too glad to fall in with an old employer, and under such peculiar circumstances, to think of doing you a mischief."

"Besides, we can all row in the same boat under the death's-head and cross-bones," said the Magsman, in allusion to the flag adopted by pirates. "And now, sir, by what name are we to know you in future?"

"Gustavus Wakefield," was the response.

"Then come on board the *Royal George* brig, Mr. Wakefield," said the Magsman, "and there we'll make you as comfortable as possible."

The resuscitated criminal accordingly prepared to follow Joe Warren from the schooner's deck; but suddenly bethinking himself of certain objects which he had left in his cabin, he hurried down to take possession of them. Those objects, which consisted of money and important documents, he speedily secured about his person; and with his portmanteau thrown over his shoulder, he proceeded on board the *Royal George*. To this same pirate-ship was the cargo of the *Firefly* speedily transferred by the buccaneers; and, as soon as this task was accomplished, a large hole was bored in the bottom of the gallant schooner, which was left to sink as speedily as it might.

Away bore the *Royal George*, away on its voyage toward the American coast; and in the course of that day did the Magsman and the Beggarman find time to pass an hour alone with Ramsey. Then from the mouth of this unhappy being did they hear the wondrous tale of his resuscitation; and they were about to explain, in their turn, the incidents which had hurried them on into the avocation of freebooters, when Watkins, the individual who acted as captain of the *Royal George*, rushed into the cabin to inform them that a British man-of-war had just been descried in the distance.

It was verging toward sunset when this announcement was made; and in a few minutes the report of a cannon booming over the bosom of the Atlantic conveyed the unmistakable command for the *Royal George* to hoist her colours. Accordingly up went the British flag to the masthead of the brig; but a second cannon from the man-of-war bore across the waters the signal for the brig to heave to and wait until the ship should come up with her. This was an intimation which the pirates were by no means disposed to obey, inasmuch as it showed that the frigate — for such was the British man-of-war now in sight — entertained some suspicion or misgiving with respect to the *Royal George*. A speedy council of war was therefore held; and it was resolved that the pirate-brig should disobey the signal of the king's ship, and trust to the coming darkness to escape the pursuit which was certain to be instituted.

The *Royal George* accordingly crowded all her canvas upon mast and spar; and away, away she sped with surprising velocity, over the waters the hues of which were deepening in proportion as the sun sank lower into the west. A third cannon was fired on board the frigate; but the brig heeded it not, and the last beams of the orb of day, ere it sank into the bosom of the occidental waves, flickered upon the white canvas of the *Royal George* as it dashed madly over the rising billows, and on the still ampler sails of the superb frigate as she pressed onward in the exciting chase.

The wind was increasing in strength, and the sunset was succeeded by a night of inky darkness. For hours and hours did the *Royal George* thus hold on through the pitchy gloom which was almost deep and dense enough to be felt; and the crew fondly hoped that their gallant ship would escape the frigate altogether.

Anxious, therefore, were the looks which sought to penetrate through the first glimmering of the dawn; piercing were the glances that the pirates threw in all directions from the masthead and the deck of the *Royal George*, the moment that the faintest gleam appeared in the eastern horizon. For a few minutes there was a solemn stillness throughout the vessel, an awful uncertainty, composed of a dread apprehension and a faint hope; for, lo! in the distance there was an object which had already begun to assume the shape and semblance of a square-rigged ship. And by degrees, as that glimmering in the east advanced, like the rays of a lamp from the far-off depths of a huge cavern or profound sepulchre, the hope grew fainter and fainter still, and the apprehension stronger and stronger, until the former expired altogether, and the latter was realized by the presence of the British frigate within gunshot distance of the *Royal George*.

And now there was a flash seen at one point of the long, dark hull of the man-of-war; and in another moment the report of a cannon came booming over the deep blue sea on whose bosom the mists of obscurity were gradually yielding to twilight. All was consternation now on board the brig, and Watkins commanded the men to obey the signal-gun by bearing to. But the Magsman and Big Beggarman would not hear of anything short of a desperate resistance; and thus a serious quarrel was well-nigh taking place on board the *Royal George*, when a second cannon from the frigate brought the buccaneers to their senses, for this time a shot came whizzing through the air. The ball struck the bowsprit, which it shivered to pieces; and the command of Watkins now experienced no opposition on the part of the Magsman and the Big Beggarman.

The *Royal George* therefore lay to, and in about a quarter of an hour the English frigate came within hailing distance. This latter was a splendid vessel, carrying thirty-six guns, having tall, tapering masts, and with an image of the goddess Diana at the figurehead. A boat was speedily lowered, and in a few moments it ran alongside the pirate-brig.

"What is the name of your ship?" asked the lieutenant who was in command of the boat.

"The *Royal George*, sir," was the reply delivered by Watkins as he leaned over the bulwarks; for as all the

ship's papers were made out in that name, the buccaneers had not as yet dared to change it.

"Whence do you come, and whither are you bound?" demanded the lieutenant, from his seat in the boat.

"Liverpool — New York," laconically answered Watkins. "Will you board us, sir, or am I to go to the frigate with the papers?"

"You will adopt the latter course, if you please," said the lieutenant.

"In one moment, sir," replied Watkins; and, turning away from the bulwark, he hurried down the companion-ladder into his own cabin to fetch the ship's papers.

"I say, old fellow, what the devil can this mean?" asked the Magsman, who, together with the Big Beggarman and Bradley, had followed Watkins to the cabin.

"The king's ship evidently suspects us," replied this individual. "It has no doubt heard of our adventure with the brig which we attacked and which was glad to pay us a thousand dollars as a compromise rather than fight it out. I told you it was foolish to begin buccaneering before you had touched at New York and got your business settled there, whatever it may be; because then you might have got fresh papers, given the ship a new name — "

"Well, well," interrupted the Magsman, impatiently, "it's no use talking of what you advised, or of what ought to have been done. It's true that we got a thousand dollars from the American brig t'other day, and that we took the whole cargo of the English schooner yesterday. But the latter has gone to the bottom, and the British man-of-war has got nothing to do with the other affair."

"Only that if they really can prove us to be pirates, we shall all be hanged at the yard-arm," said Watkins, solemnly.

"And what the devil are you going to do, then?" demanded the Big Beggarman, who did not much admire the prospect thus disagreeably held out for his contemplation.

"I am going on board the frigate to tell as good a story and put as bold a face upon the matter as I can," said Watkins; "and if I succeed in making the captain of his Majesty's ship *Diana* believe that it's all right with us, I suppose you'll give me credit for some little good management?"

"But do you really think you can set at rest any suspicions

that may be entertained?" demanded the Magsman, an unwonted feeling of uneasiness creeping over him.

"I must do my best," said Watkins, as he secured the ship's papers about his person. "Now, then, who will act as supercargo? Come, Bradley, you shall go with me in that capacity."

"Ay, ay, sir," responded the individual thus addressed.

Watkins and Bradley accordingly quitted the cabin together, and embarked in the man-of-war's boat, which instantaneously put off with them.

"I don't like the look of all this at all," said the Magsman to his companion in iniquity, when they were left alone together in the cabin of the *Royal George*.

"Watkins and Bradley going off along with each other in this manner, eh?" said the Beggarman. "Well, I don't like it either."

"Those two fellows have always stuck together like bricks from the very beginning," observed the Magsman.

"And I've often seen 'em in earnest conversation together," added the Big Beggarman. "But, after all, there may be nothing wrong betwixt them."

"Well, I hope not. But wasn't Watkins in a devil of a hurry just now to lay to, even before the shot carried away our bowsprit?" said the Magsman. "And then," he continued, the cloud deepening on his countenance as his suspicions grew stronger, "didn't he seem to be precious ready to go on board the frigate, in spite of the danger of being run up at the yard-arm?"

"I don't know what to think," said the Big Beggarman, in a state of most bewildering perplexity and painful uneasiness. "I can scarcely make my mind up to proclaim Watkins and Bradley both traitors and scoundrels; for didn't they negotiate that transaction between us and the American brig?"

"By Heaven, they did!" cried the Magsman, slapping his hand violently upon his thigh as he leaned against the cabin table; "and now a thought flashes to my mind."

"What is it?" demanded the Big Beggarman, eagerly.

"I tell you what, Stephen, it was through that very affair we're now betrayed," exclaimed Joe Warren. "By goles! I see it all, I see it all, and we are betrayed, as sure as I'm alive."

"How do you know? What do you mean?" inquired Stephen Price, *alias* the Big Beggarman.

"I mean that when Watkins and Bradley went on board the American brig to settle the compromise which the captain of that vessel proposed to make by paying the thousand dollars —"

"Yes, yes," interrupted the Beggarman, impatiently. "Well, what did Watkins and Bradley do on that occasion, think you?"

"They no doubt told the American captain to give information concerning us to the first cruiser he should meet," replied Joe Warren, his countenance expressing a diabolical hatred and a ferocious longing for vengeance against those whom he imagined to be engaged in betraying him.

"By jingo, that is not unlikely," exclaimed the Big Beggarman. "Watkins alluded just now to that affair of the American brig, and even reproached us with it."

"To be sure! A man always throws into your teeth the very thing which is to be made the instrument of your own betrayal and ruin," cried the Magsman, bitterly.

"Betrayal, ruin!" echoed Philip Ramsey, who at that moment descended from the deck into the cabin, and whose ear caught those ominous words as he was gliding down the companion-ladder. "What mean you, my friends?" he demanded, with terrified looks thrown upon the two ruffians alternately.

"We mean what we say," replied the Magsman, ferociously; "that we are betrayed, and that we intend to sell our lives as dearly as possible."

"Betrayed!" echoed Ramsey, once more. "By whom? Your captain and his mate have gone on board the frigate."

"And they won't come back again, I'll be bound," added the Big Beggarman, gloomily. "Now, then, every man to himself in case of need;" and he began to arm his own person to the very teeth.

"That's a good example, Steve," said Joe Warren, fastening a cutlass to his own waist, and sticking the belt around with pistols. "Now, Mr. Ram— Wakefield, I mean —"

But at this moment the din of a cannon broke upon their ears, and shook the *Royal George* as much as if it had been fired upon its own deck instead of from the frigate.

The Magsman and the Big Beggarman hurried up the companion-ladder, and the first glance they threw in the direction of the *Diana* showed them that she had moored much nearer to the brig and was evidently prepared to carry matters to the extreme, if resisted.

"My brave fellows," cried the Magsman, addressing the sailors of the *Royal George*, who were all collected in one group and gazing with evident uneasiness on the man-of-war, "you need not remain in any suspense whatsoever. Prepare yourselves for the worst: we are betrayed. If we are taken we shall be run up to the yard-arm."

"And so we mean to fight to the very last," added the Big Beggarman, flourishing his cutlass.

"Bravo," shouted the half-dozen sailors belonging to the *Royal George*, and who were disposed to follow the desperate fortunes of Joe Warren and Stephen Price rather than surrender with the certainty of being hanged.

A voice now hailed the brig from the deck of the frigate.

"Let us learn what the king's ship has to say to us," exclaimed some of the sailors of the *Royal George*. "Hark! it's the captain of the *Diana* that's going to speak."

And such was the fact. The commanding officer of the man-of-war guaranteed their lives to the sailors if they would surrender at discretion; but from this proffered amnesty the two ringleaders (the Magsman and Big Beggarman being thereby meant) were excluded.

Scarcely was this proposal made when the half-dozen sailors of the *Royal George* precipitated themselves upon Joe Warren and Stephen Price with such unexpected suddenness that these two redoubtable individuals were overpowered in an instant. To disarm and bind them was the work of another moment; and as soon as it was perceived on board the frigate that the commanding officer's proffered amnesty with respect to the sailor's lives had produced such immediate and important results, a galley was again put off to the *Royal George* to receive the prisoners and the rest of the crew. Into this boat were both the Magsman and the Big Beggarman accordingly forced to descend. The six sailors, having thrown down their arms, likewise took their seats in the galley. Ramsey was compelled to follow, and the wounded sailor who had survived the slaughter on board the *Firefly* schooner was lowered in his hammock

into the boat. A second galley now arrived from the *Diana* with an officer and some few sailors who were to take charge of the *Royal George*; and thus terminated the merchant vessel's brief career of piracy.

Sullen and silent, overwhelmed with the crushing sense of their sudden disaster, and cursing in the depths of their souls the treachery of Watkins and Bradley, as well as the cowardly perfidiousness of the sailors, Joe Warren and Stephen Price stood in a few minutes upon the deck of the *Diana* frigate.

But scarcely had they thus set foot on board the man-of-war when an ejaculation of surprise struck upon their ears; and casting their looks in the direction whence the expression of wonder had emanated, they recognized the well-known countenance of Tim Meagles!

CHAPTER XIV

A LADY OF QUALITY IN DIFFICULTIES

TURN we now to a moderate-sized but handsomely furnished house in Piccadilly, at no great distance from the larger and still more splendid mansion of Lord Florimel.

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, and in the elegant breakfast-parlour of the moderate-sized dwelling just alluded to a lady was half-sitting and half-reclining upon a sofa. A cheerful fire burned in the grate; the curtains of scarlet satin gave, with prismatic effect, a fainter tint of their own hue to the mellowed and subdued light which penetrated through the casements; and the rich crimson of the paper on the walls and the velvet fittings of the furniture all combined to render the complexion of the fair occupant of that apartment the more delicately lovely.

In the roseate atmosphere of the room, and reclining upon the deep crimson cushions of the sofa, this beauteous woman was set off to the utmost advantage by the morning wrapper of white muslin which was gathered negligently around her. Her hair, of indescribable paleness, but glossy and shining, was floating partially over the back of the sofa, and partially upon her own alabaster shoulders, which her *déshabille* left revealed. That hair, which the lady was wont to wear in myriads of curls when her toilet was completed for the day, was now flowing in all the beauteous abandonment of massive tresses, and it shone against the crimson velvet of the sofa like lace of flaxen material on which the sun is shining.

Her countenance was pale, very pale, and even slightly care-worn in appearance; but its extreme loveliness and purity would have disarmed the most critical observer of his objection to its colourless aspect. The hue of health

had fled from her cheek, but the camellia-like damask still remained; and, moreover, it was evident that happiness and the mind's tranquillity would soon bring back the tint of the rose to mingle with the stainlessness of the lily. Besides, the red richness and the luscious fulness remained to the lips, the liquid blue and languishing expression to the eyes, and the classic stamp of elegance to the whole countenance.

Then her form, her admirable form, as it was stretched half-reclining upon that sofa, with as much abandonment of the person as was likely to be indulged in when the superb creature was in the solitude of her own parlour and in the negligence of her morning apparel, that fine form, we say, was now to be scanned at its fullest advantage. No corset gave an artificial shape or setting to any contour; the bust retained its rounded voluptuousness through its own natural plumpness; the luxuriance of the lady's bosom marred not the perfect symmetry and rich shapeliness of either of those globes of snow.

Though her form had expanded into the maturity of its charms, yet was her entire figure characterized by an elasticity which imparted dignity to her carriage when walking, grace and ease to her attitude when sitting, and an air of ineffable abandonment and soft sensuousness to her whole person when reclining negligently as we find her now.

The muslin wrapper being slightly drawn up, displayed just so much of one of the lady's legs as to indicate by its beautiful moulding at the extremity and the robustness into which the delicacy of the ankle gradually swelled, that her limbs were modelled with a grace, a symmetry, and a richness corresponding with the extreme fulness of the bust and the taper elegance of the waist.

This lady, as the reader has doubtless already conjectured, was Mrs. Fitzherbert, the cast-off wife of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

She was reclining in a pensive mood upon that sofa, utterly unmindful of the personal charms which her unstudied attitude displayed. Nor, indeed, was there any necessity for a coquettish affectation on this occasion; for she was alone in that apartment, alone with her own sorrowing thoughts.

The cup of chocolate remained untouched upon the table,

the newspaper lay unread upon the sofa. A dozen letters, from some frivolous lady friends, or else containing invitations to balls and parties which she had no heart to grace with her presence, were tossed negligently aside, the very manner in which they lay fully testifying the impatience with which they had been opened and the disgust or disappointment with which they had been flung aside the instant the few first lines of their contents were scanned.

The fact was that Mrs. Fitzherbert found herself in the most cruel embarrassment. Too proud to apply to the Prince of Wales for pecuniary assistance, she was utterly without resources at the present moment. Not an article of furniture in the house which she had taken was paid for, and the upholsterer was already clamorous for his money. He had heard from the neighbouring tradesmen that everything which went into Mrs. Fitzherbert's dwelling was delivered upon trust, that not a shilling had as yet been paid to any of her creditors, that the smallest accounts, which are usually cash transactions, were never liquidated, and that her doors were constantly beset by duns. He had, therefore, become alarmed for the sum which Mrs. Fitzherbert owed him; and as the amount was two thousand pounds, he felt by no means inclined to lose it for want of putting the machinery of the law into motion. He had accordingly instructed his attorney to menace the lady with instantaneous process; and as that professional gentleman happened to be Mr. Rigden, we need scarcely inform our readers that Mrs. Fitzherbert had little mercy to expect at his hands.

She had accordingly written to two friends, explaining her unpleasant position and demanding a loan. The Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Desborough were the ladies to whom Mrs. Fitzherbert had thus unbosomed herself; and she had confidently expected supplies by hand on the previous evening, or at least by post on the same morning of which we are writing. But no answers of any kind had reached her; and she therefore felt assured that her two friends must be out of town.

What could she do? To whom besides should she address herself? She had many wealthy acquaintances, it was true; but there were none, besides the splendid Georgiana of Devonshire and the amiable Eleanor of Desborough, whom she chose to admit into the privacy of her confidence.

As for humbling herself so far as to write to the prince — never! Her pride revolted against such a proceeding; for she could not forget the dastardly, detestably ruffian-like means which he had adopted to break off his connection with her. Had he thrown himself upon her mercy, implored her to release him from a compact which menaced his prospects as heir to the British throne, and thus trusted entirely to her love, her generosity, and her friendship, oh, she felt that their relative positions would have been very different indeed; but no, the first gentleman in Europe had, with characteristic heartlessness, employed the most villainous, cowardly, and despicable means in order to coerce her into a separation. Yes, she felt all this; and she vowed that she would sooner go to a debtor's gaol and rot there, than make the slightest appeal to the purse of the man who, though really her husband in the sight of Heaven, had nevertheless proved her bitterest enemy and her most cold-blooded persecutor.

Such was the position and such were the feelings of Mrs. Fitzherbert on this particular morning when we again introduce her to our readers' notice. Small wonder, then, was it that she was pensive and care-worn, and that the colour had completely fled from her cheeks.

She was in the midst of a painful reverie, when the door was opened softly, and an ill-looking countenance protruded itself. The door was then pushed more widely open, and the entire person of the individual to whom the disagreeable physiognomy belonged passed into the room. He was followed by another man as repulsive in appearance as himself; and the two individuals, stopping short, exchanged looks, or rather, made grimaces at each other, as much as to imply what a capital piece of fun it was. They then took a survey of the apartment; and having once more expressed their delight by vulgar grins at the stealthy manner in which they had introduced themselves, they advanced toward the sofa.

The sound of their footsteps now fell for the first time upon Mrs. Fitzherbert's ears; and, gazing around with a sudden start, she was both amazed and terrified at beholding the unceremonious visitors. But, almost instantaneously recovering the dignity which was natural to her, she rose from the sofa, drew the morning wrapper hastily

over her bosom, and said, in a haughty tone, "Who are you?"

"The lady says who are we, Jack," observed one of the men, looking in a leisurely way at his companion. "I should think she ought to suspect you at any rate, by that hangdog wisage of yourn."

"It 'ud be a heavy bribe, master, that 'ud make me call you 'ansom, at all ewents," was the reply, delivered in a half-sulky, half-subdued tone of menial dependence.

"Again I ask who are you?" said Mrs. Fitzherbert, though her fears had already suggested the reply to the question.

"Well, ma'am," observed the individual who had first spoken, and who was dressed with a shabby kind of flashiness, "I won't keep you in no manner of uncertainty on this ere pint. My name's Nathan Crimp, and my office is in Chancery Lane. That's my man, and his name's Jack. What his t'other name be, I don't know — and don't think he does hisself."

"I presume, then, that you are an officer?" said Mrs. Fitzherbert, her heart appearing to rise into her throat and suffocate her as she thus ventured to give utterance to the cruel suspicion that involved a crowning misfortune.

"Lord bless you, ma'am," exclaimed Mr. Crimp, "I thought you knowed all along who we was, and only asked just by way of a matter of form like. I'm sure if I'd suspected for a moment that you was in the dark as to our identity, I should have put you up to that dodge the wery first moment. But when your flunkey down in the hall there said that he'd come up and announce us, I told him not to trouble hisself, but just show us which room you was in, and we'd announce ourselves. And so me and my man Jack there, we stole in as quiet as mice, so as not to disturb you, ma'am, which was wery considerate on our part, seeing that Rigden won't pay us a bit the more for doing the thing genteelly."

"Then am I to understand that Mr. Rigden has had recourse to extreme measures?" said Mrs. Fitzherbert, with difficulty restraining a violent outburst of hysterical grief.

"Rigden always does, ma'am," replied Mr. Crimp, who was the most garrulous sheriff's-officer ever known. "He's a sharp 'un, ma'am, a preshus sharp 'un, isn't he, Jack?"

"Wery, master," growled the individual thus appealed to. "Rigden ain't a man to stand still while there's anythink to be got by going on ahead."

"By goles, you're right there, my boy," ejaculated Mr. Nathan Crimp. "And now, ma'am," he said, adopting a mincing tone of excruciating politeness, as he put his hat under his arm and produced a piece of paper of very ominous form and aspect, "perhaps you'll be so kind as to pay me the sum of two thousand pounds and seventeen shillings, debt, together with four guineas, costs — "

"To cut the matter short at once, sir," interrupted Mrs. Fitzherbert, "I have not the slightest means of settling this liability. You must therefore place an execution in the house, and I will forthwith apply to my friends."

"Beg pardon, ma'am," observed Crimp, "but you altogether mistake the natur' of this here business. Don't the lady, Jack? "

"No wonder, since you've took all this time to explain it," said the man, with sulky laconism.

"Well, I'm blowed!" exclaimed Mr. Crimp, crushing his hat under his arm with the sudden paroxysm of excitement into which his follower's audacious observation threw him. "Who the devil would have thought that the lady didn't understand the thing all along? Here's a *ca-sa.*, and all in order, ma'am; and now if you'll be so obleeging as to come along with me to Chancery Lane — "

A light broke in upon the brain of the unhappy lady, and the half-stifled shriek which burst from her lips cut short the garrulity of Mr. Nathan Crimp. Until within the last minute she had fancied that the officer's purpose was merely to put an execution into the house, a process to which she had not been altogether a stranger in her lifetime; but now that she found her personal freedom to be actually compromised and that it was her arrest which was contemplated, a sudden coldness struck to her heart, and, unable altogether to subdue her feelings, she gave vent to that expression of anguish which interrupted the garrulity of the bailiff.

Falling back upon the sofa whence she had risen on discovering the presence of the intruders, Mrs. Fitzherbert actually thrust her handkerchief into her mouth to crush the emotions that were struggling for hysterical ebullition; and Mr. Nathan Crimp, under the impression that she was

about to faint away, rushed forward, pulled a brandy-flask from his pocket, and was about to make an attempt to pour some of the burning fluid down the throat of the elegant lady of quality, when his man Jack caught him by the arm growling a savage remonstrance in his ear at the same time.

This little byplay on the part of the bailiff and his follower had the effect of reminding Mrs. Fitzherbert of the necessity of maintaining her dignity in the presence of those men; and, crushing her emotions with an almost superhuman effort, she turned toward Crimp, saying, "If I make you a handsome present, will you allow this process to stand over till to-morrow?"

"It can't be done, ma'am," was the prompt reply. "You see, the caption's made, and can't be unmade save and except by payment on the von hand or a discharge on the t'other. My man Jack is a vitness to the caption being made aforesaid, and he can't unvitness it, as the sayin' is. Them's the difficulties, ma'am."

"But you will at least grant me a few hours to send to my friends and procure the money?" said Mrs. Fitzherbert, her tone becoming less imperious and her manner more conciliatory as the precise details of her position developed themselves, one after another, in all their painful and perplexing reality.

"Well, ma'am, I don't mind leaving my man Jack to keep you company for an hour or so, while you send around to your friends," observed Mr. Nathan Crimp, after a few moments' consideration. "But you see, I can't lose sight on you altogether, or else you ceases to be in custody, and that's as good as flight and escape on your part, whereby Rigden could go and fix the sheriff for the whole debt."

"You mean me to understand, then," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, with difficulty restraining alike her indignation and her tears, but almost choking through the efforts which it cost her thus to dam up the natural flow of her feelings, "you mean me to understand that either yourself or your follower must remain in charge of my person until I am securely lodged in —"

"My lockup in Chancery Lane," added Crimp, finishing the sentence in the manner which the lady's emotions would not permit her to achieve.

"But you must at least allow me to retire to my own

room and dress myself becomingly?" said the lady, feeling so truly wretched that she would have welcomed even death at the moment, in whatever shape he might have chosen to appear.

"Beg pardon, ma'am," hastily ejaculated Mr. Crimp, "but not without my examining the room aforehand to see whether there's any inner doors leading elsewhere. And even supposing it's all right in that respeck, my man Jack must remain outside in the passage to see that you don't forget yourself and walk off to pay a morning wisit, or go out shopping, or take a airin' in the park —"

"Enough, enough!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, the bitter cup of her humiliation being now, as she fancied, full to overflowing.

But she was speedily destined to experience more poignant pangs, more mortifying rebuffs, and more distressing reverses.

CHAPTER XV

THE LADY OF QUALITY AND HER DOMESTICS

THERE was a long pause after Mrs. Fitzherbert had abruptly and imperiously cut short Mr. Nathan Crimp's speculations as to the course which she might pursue were she suffered to remain unwatched by either himself or his man. The unhappy lady revolved in her mind a thousand plans in a minute, but none appeared equal to the present emergency. For the case was urgent in the extreme: two thousand pounds must be paid at once, or to a lockup house must she go.

While Mrs. Fitzherbert was thus deliberating upon her difficulties and the means of extricating herself therefrom and while Crimp was whispering aside to his man Jack that "the fine lady would have to go to quod, arter all," the door was suddenly thrown open, and in bounced a tall, handsome, but bold-looking young woman, dressed in a very coquettish style. This was the principal lady's-maid in the establishment of Mrs. Fitzherbert, in whose service she had been for some years, and by whom she was regarded as a confidante and even friendly adviser.

"I am engaged at present, Alicia, you perceive, disagreeably engaged," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, somewhat surprised and annoyed at the unceremonious manner in which the abigail had burst into the apartment. "When I want you I will ring."

"Very good, ma'am, you may ring," exclaimed the lady's-maid, who had evidently made up her mind to put a bold and insolent front upon the matter which she had in hand, "but perhaps I sha'n't come."

"Alicia, this from you?" cried Mrs. Fitzherbert, who a minute before would have staked her soul upon the fidelity,

attachment, and gratitude of a domestic whom she had ever treated with especial consideration.

"Well, ma'am, I don't mind saying this is from me," was the prompt reply. "But all I want is my wages, if you please, ma'am, — eighteen months' arrears, besides thirty-four guineas of my little savings which you kindly offered to take care of for me, ma'am," continued the abigail, with a mixture of sarcasm and superciliousness in her tone and manner.

"Alicia, you must understand my present position," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, dashing away the tears which had started forth upon her long lashes, and speaking in an appealing tone. "You see these men, and you can comprehend their mission."

"Yes, ma'am, I see the men," rejoined Alicia, in a voice of dogged insolence; "and it's precisely because I do see them here that I want my wages and the money that's owing to me. I don't suppose a lady like you means to cheat a poor hard-working creature like me out of the pittance that happens to be due."

"Alicia, I am incapable of cheating any one," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, her countenance flushing with sudden indignation.

"I'm delighted to hear it, ma'am," observed the abigail, with the most provoking doggedness; "because it's a proof that you mean to pay me what's due and let me take myself off at once."

"Is it possible that you intend to desert me at this moment?" exclaimed the unhappy lady, who now felt as if all the world were abandoning her.

"I don't see how you can afford to keep me any longer, ma'am," was the answer; "and I really don't feel inclined either to work for nothing or keep myself when out at service."

Mrs. Fitzherbert passed her handkerchief hastily over her countenance and endeavoured to subdue her emotions sufficiently to give a calm and dignified response to the lady's-maid; but at the same instant the door was again opened, and the butler entered the room.

He was a sleek, stout, comfortable-looking man, of middle age, and attired with great precision in a black suit; but his shirt-frill, cravat, and wristbands were of the finest linen and most snowy whiteness.

Making a low bow, he advanced up to the sofa where his mistress was seated, and bending down toward her, said, in a whispering tone fraught with the profoundest respect, "Would it be convenient, madam, for you to settle my little account?"

"What, you likewise have turned against me, Robinson?" cried Mrs. Fitzherbert, aloud.

"I do not deserve such a reproach, ma'am," answered the butler, in a soft tone and an insinuating manner. "But I must take leave to remind you, madam, with every sentiment of respect and every feeling of devotion, that I am responsible to the wine-merchant, the butcher, the baker, the grocer, and sundry other tradesmen; and that unless I liquidate their bills this very morning, ma'am, I shall be put to serious inconvenience ere nightfall."

"What do you mean, Robinson?" demanded the lady. "You are not responsible for my debts."

"But those persons hold that I am, madam," replied the butler. "At all events, individuals in my situation do not choose to quarrel with individuals in theirs, and consequently, with all due submission and respect, I wish to see these little matters settled at once."

But before Mrs. Fitzherbert had time to make another comment upon the butler's demands, the door was thrown open again, and the coachman entered the room.

He was a short, stout, red-faced man, with small twinkling green eyes, and an air of dogged resolve apparent beneath the look of good-nature which first struck the observation. He wore the powdered wig and the gorgeous livery which a detestable fashion then imposed, and still imposes, upon that class of British serfs who belong to the grade of flunkeyism; and always having hated the disgusting badge of slavery which he was compelled to wear, he was of a disposition by no means likely to allow an opportunity to pass of venting his spite upon any member, whether male or female, of that aristocratic class which upholds the system whereby a distinctive garb is given to the man-servant in the lordly dwelling as well as to the pauper in the workhouse or to the felon in the gaol.

Darting a rapid glance of inquiry upon the lady's-maid and the butler, and receiving from each of them as prompt a look expressive of a negative, the coachman made an awkward

kind of a bow, for he was a clumsy man and had been engaged in Mrs. Fitzherbert's service solely on account of his obesity, fat persons being preferred by the rich folks for the office that he filled.

"Now, Matthews, what do you want?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, her indignation once more triumphing over her affliction and bringing the blood to her cheeks.

"Please, ma'am," was the response, delivered in a hoarse tone which was habitual with the man, "I wait upon you as a deppitation —"

"A what?" cried the lady, in unfeigned astonishment.

"A deppitation from the domestics which is now assembled down in the servants' hall," continued the coachman; "and bein' a deppitation from them —"

"What does he mean, Robinson?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, turning toward the butler.

"He means a deputation, madam," replied the individual thus appealed to. Then, all his former blandness of tone and manner changing into a cold reserve which the slightest provocation would push into a haughty insolence, the butler added, "And I really think, ma'am, with all due respect, that this is not the time to assume the airs of a great lady and affect ignorance of the man's meaning just because his pronunciation may be somewhat defective."

If a glance had the power to kill, the look which Mrs. Fitzherbert threw on the butler would have transfixed him on the spot. Had she been the recognized wife of the Prince of Wales, had she been in the full enjoyment of the title of "Her Royal Highness," she could not have assumed at the instant a more majestic bearing nor a mien of haughtier grandeur. Her brows arched more nobly, her carriage grew more queenlike, her bosom swelled more superbly, and this was all the work of a single hour.

"And now, Matthews, what is it?" she demanded, turning once again toward the coachman.

"Please, ma'am," said this individual, "I come on the part of myself and them of my fellow servants as isn't here now at this present speaking but is anxiously waiting below for me to go back to them to report the success of my arrand. And what I have to say may be summed up in a wery few words, which is, ma'am, we hopes and expects you'll pay us all the arrears of vages which is doo to us."

And having thus delivered himself, the coachman cast a determined look around, not only upon his mistress, the butler, and the lady's-maid, but likewise upon the two bailiffs who were standing apart enjoying the scene which we are relating.

"I now perceive that your conduct toward me is the result of a plan previously settled and resolved upon," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, sweeping her indignant glances around upon the three domestics; "for I did not fail to notice the look of intelligence which passed between you when Matthews first entered the room just now. That look asked, as plainly as eyes can ever speak, whether you, Robinson, and you, Alicia, had been paid your demands upon me; and the responsive glances which you both threw back were significant of the negative. Now I am well aware that you are entitled to your wages, and I deeply, deeply regret that I cannot liquidate them in full at this moment. But I cannot; and even while explaining myself thus frankly, I must observe that the course which you, Robinson and Matthews, have adopted toward me is unmanly in the extreme, while your conduct, Alicia, is unfeeling to a degree. I have now no more to say, unless it be that I am going hence to a prison, but that in the course of this day or to-morrow I will borrow from my friends enough to pay all I owe to my servants."

And Mrs. Fitzherbert, whose voice had begun to falter only when she made so unmistakable an allusion to a debtor's gaol, now turned abruptly aside and concealed her face in her handkerchief.

"We are robbed as completely as if our pockets was picked," exclaimed the coachman, at the top of his hoarse, rough voice, while he stamped his foot savagely down upon the floor.

"It's a dead take-in, a downright cheat," screamed the lady's-maid, in thrilling tones that vibrated with hysterical rage.

"Every sentiment of respect which I lately experienced toward Mrs. Fitzherbert has now evaporated," said the butler; "and I must candidly and freely confess that I agree with the remarks which have fallen from Mr. Matthews and Miss Alicia. In a word, we are all the victims of a mere adventuress."

"The idea of such a pauperized, upstart-creatur' a-ven-

turin' to put a man like me into such a cussed toggery as this," exclaimed the coachman, tossing his powdered wig indignantly on one side and throwing off his lace-bedizened coat on the other.

"A lady who takes a butler should be able to pay him," said Mr. Robinson. Then, with all the bitterness of sarcasm which the natural malignity of his disposition could enable him to throw into his language, he observed, "Even the very lowest of kept women always pay their servants whom they are obliged to turn off because they themselves are turned off by their paramours."

"To be sure," added Alicia; "the common street-walker takes care of her servants."

"And therefore I'm sure the prostitute of fashionable life ought to do the same," remarked the butler.

"Begone, vile wretches!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, starting from the mournful reverie into which she had fallen, and springing at the same time from the sofa, her whole frame quivering with indignation, her cheeks glowing with the hue of crimson, and her eyes lighting up into the brightest fires. "Begone, I say, and dare not to level your foul slander against me!"

"Heydey! what does all this mean?" cried Alicia. "Slander indeed! I suppose it's no slander to say that you lived with the prince as his concubine."

"And was bundled out, neck and crop, t'other day," observed the coachman.

"Like any cast-off slipper," added the butler.

"Oh, if I dared but proclaim the truth!" murmured the unhappy lady, flinging herself back upon the sofa and pressing her hands against her throbbing brows, as if she could thereby steady their violent pulsation. "Leave me, I beseech you to leave me. If you will not obey my wish as a command, you will grant it as an act of mercy," she said, in a more audible voice and with a manner expressive of urgent entreaty.

"Well, let us take ourselves off, Mr. Robinson," said Alicia. "I'm sure I don't know how I shall ever get a place again, after being in the service of such a characterless demirep as this."

"A harlot without even a pension!" observed the butler, in a tone of the deepest disgust; so that it is fair to suppose

that Mrs. Fitzherbert would have appeared less blamable in his eyes had her name been foisted on the pension-list, along with those of the Dukes of Grafton, St. Albans, Richmond, and Cleveland, and other nobles who enjoy the hereditary right of plundering the public treasury simply because they are descended from some of the lascivious wretches who prostituted their persons to that execrable monarch Charles the Second.

"Ah! 'tis a reg'lar breakup, a awful smash," observed the coachman, volunteering the remark by way of appendix to the last one which had fallen from the lips of the butler. "There's a many people will be ruined by this here woman's fall," he continued, pointing to Mrs. Fitzherbert; "and some poor wictims of creditors will go and drown or hang theirselves when they hears that everything has gone to pot and the lady herself laid up safe in lavender. But that's the way with them strumpets which gives theirselves the airs of royalty for a time and then tumbles down into their natral sphere. What wexes me most of all, is to think that I ever put on that cussed wig and this trumpery gewgaw livery just to please the wanity of a creatur' as will come down to be a reglar street-valker arter all."

"Yes, and we shall yet see her picking oakum in Bridewell," hysterically shrieked forth Miss Alicia, as she bounced out of the room.

"Having no sentiment of respect left, and wondering that I could ever have entertained any at all," said the butler, "I not only echo the anticipation of the last speaker, but likewise confidently hope to see it speedily fulfilled."

"And now we may all take ourselves off, as thoroughly swindled and robbed as ever a set of poor hard-working devils was," growled the coachman.

But Mrs. Fitzherbert's ears caught not these volleys let off by the retiring enemy, for she had fainted.

When she returned to consciousness she found herself lying upon the sofa, with Mr. Nathan Crimp bending over her and sprinkling water on her countenance, while his man Jack held the basin into which the bailiff thrust his dirty fingers in order to switch off the drops of the cooling element in the most convenient manner.

Hastily and somewhat haughtily thanking the two officers for their attention, Mrs. Fitzherbert begged them to grant

her an hour's grace ere they insisted on her removal to a lockup house; and this boon being accorded, she penned half a dozen letters to intimate friends, whose pecuniary succour she earnestly requested "to save her from a most painful difficulty."

But when she rang the bell for the purpose of despatching her servants with those missives, Mr. Nathan Crimp very candidly informed her that she need not expect any response to the summons, inasmuch as the domestics had one and all quitted the house while Mrs. Fitzherbert was lying in a state of unconsciousness. The lady's cheeks flushed with indignation for a few moments, and then became ghastly pale, as she bit her quivering lip; tears also started forth upon her cheeks, tears of mingled humiliation and rage, and not the first tears, either, which she had shed that morning.

Yes, it was indeed true; every one of the servants had departed, with a previous intimation to Mr. Crimp that they should send for their boxes in the course of the day; and thus was Mrs. Fitzherbert's house as completely and as suddenly abandoned by all the dependents as if the plague had manifested itself in her own person.

Mr. Nathan Crimp now offered to take the letters for Mrs. Fitzherbert and await the answers at the houses where they were to be delivered, and to this proposal she was glad to assent. The bailiff's follower was, however, left behind to keep a strict watch upon the lady; and thus was the brilliant Mrs. Fitzherbert, the wife of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, the lately courted, worshipped, adored genius of the fashionable world, thus was she, we say, deserted by her dependents and left to such care as a bailiff and his man might choose to take of her.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LADY OF QUALITY'S ARISTOCRATIC ACQUAINTANCES

ALTHOUGH Mr. Nathan Crimp saw as plainly as possible that Mrs. Fitzherbert's circumstances were in a very desperate condition, yet he was shrewd enough to calculate that a lady who had occupied such an elevated position in the fashionable world could not be utterly destitute of friends or denuded of resources; and he therefore saw every chance of being well remunerated for any little services he might perform or any indulgences he might allow.

The instinct of rats teaches them to abandon a house which is on the point of falling; and thus did the selfishness of the menials prompt them to hurry away from the scene of the crashing fortunes of their mistress. This fact had certainly led Mr. Crimp to believe that the breakup with Mrs. Fitzherbert was complete; but still, as we have observed, he felt pretty certain of recompense for his own services.

Provided, therefore, with the half-dozen letters, Mr. Nathan Crimp set out on the mission which he had undertaken; and, calling a coach, he ordered himself to be driven in the first instance to Lady Singleton's mansion in Clarges Street.

On alighting at the splendid abode, Mr. Crimp knocked and rang in a somewhat authoritative manner; for he considered that he was now performing the part of Mrs. Fitzherbert's friend and therefore derived a certain dignity from that position.

"Well, what is it, my man?" demanded the hall-porter, surveying Mr. Crimp with a somewhat suspicious eye.

"Is your missus at home?" asked the bailiff, assuming a look and manner of awful importance.

"D'ye mean the housekeeper or cook, which?" exclaimed the hall-porter, pursing up his mouth pompously when he had put the question.

"I mean Lady Singleton, that's which," responded Mr. Crimp. "So you'll just be so kind as to give her this here dokiment, — you may take your davy it isn't a writ, — and tell her as how the genelman which brought it is a-waiting her ladyship's pleasure."

"What name shall I say?" inquired the hall-porter.

"What name, sir? Nathan Crimp, if you must know," was the prompt reply.

The countenance and manner of the hall-porter changed in an instant; it was ice suddenly thawing, or, rather, turning into the most dulcet honey. For the fact was that the man understood the bailiff's answer to be precisely this: "What name? Sir Nathan Crimp, if you must know." The consequence was that the liveried functionary was seized with the conviction that the shabby-looking visitor was some eccentric baronet not overparticular in his toilet, but probably very rich; and he therefore, without any more ado, ushered the sheriff's-officer up into the drawing-room, throwing open the door and bawling out in the usually ceremonial manner, "Sir Nathan Crimp!"

Lady Singleton was the widow of a baronet whose family was distinctly traceable back (thanks to the inventive genius of certain clever dealers in vanity-fictions at the Heralds' College) to the reign of William Rufus. Her ladyship was now in her fiftieth year; and when inheriting her late husband's immense fortune, she had carefully preserved all his ancestral pride likewise. She was childless. Some distant relative of her deceased husband had succeeded to the baronetcy, while she secured all the broad lands and the hoarded cash; and she was, therefore, on the lookout for a new matrimonial venture.

At the precise moment when the bailiff was so pompously announced by the hall-porter as Sir Nathan Crimp, Lady Singleton was seated in the drawing-room with her "toady," or "companion." A toady, or companion, is a poor gentlewoman who wants a home and everything else, and is therefore glad to accept all those requisites upon conditions which, if not absolutely specified in a verbal or written contract, are generally understood. For a toady must be

a woman of cheerful disposition, or at least must invariably seem to be cheerful; she must never give way to bad spirits, never have a headache, never be out of sorts, never grumble at anything, never be discontented. On the contrary, she must be satisfied with everything that the lady with whom she lives may say or do; she must never contradict, never have an opinion of her own, never see with her own eyes, nor hear with her own ears, nor think with her own mind. In fact, she must perform all those functions through the organs and senses of her patroness. She must always be prepared to go out when the lady goes out, or stay at home when the lady stays at home. She must nurse and coddle the lady when she is ill, and put up with all her caprices, whims, and fancies when she is well. She must always be ready to become a scapegoat, as well as an object against which her patroness may vent a passing ill-hùmour. She must carry the prayer-book to church on Sunday, and hold the lap-dog on her knees in the carriage; and she must take excellent care not to draw toward herself that admiration or those attentions on the part of the other sex which are looked upon as the rightful monopoly of her patroness. These are the duties and functions of a toady; and for the discharge of the same she is lodged, fed, salaried, and rewarded with cast-off gowns into the bargain.

Lady Singleton, then, was with Miss Jukes, her "companion," when the bailiff was announced. Miss Jukes was forty-two years of age, short, stumpy, fat, and good-humoured; Lady Singleton was tall, scraggy, and prim. The high-sounding name of Sir Nathan Crimp made them both start; and when they fixed their eyes upon the dirty, half-shabby, and half-flashy appearance of the bailiff, they were rather shocked for a moment. But the same thought which had already struck the hall-porter, simultaneously sprang up in the minds of those ladies; and they accordingly concluded that the visitor must be some eccentric baronet or knight, whose enormous wealth was perhaps so notorious as to counteract any disagreeable results which might arise to himself in consequence of the neglect apparent in his toilet.

The hall-porter placed a chair for the bailiff's accommodation, and then withdrew. Crimp seated himself on the edge of the chair, crushed his hat nervously between his

knees, plucked up a spirit, and said, "Beg pardon, ladies, but I'm a friend of Mrs. Fitzherbert, which is a lady not unbeknown to you."

The widow and Miss Jukes exchanged rapid glances, as much as to say, "What extraordinary English our new friend talks!" but the announcement that he was a friend of Mrs. Fitzherbert disarmed them of any suspicion which the little grammatical solecisms might have engendered concerning him.

"And pray how is that dear lady?" inquired Miss Jukes. "It is a week since you saw your excellent friend, Mrs. Fitzherbert," added the toady, turning toward Lady Singleton.

"It is, my dear," responded the wealthy widow. "I have been very neglectful in not calling upon her; but really, what with Lady Pooke's card-party, the Honourable Mrs. Dulcimer's drum, the Countess of Blandingford's rout —"

"Oh, yes, indeed, my dear Lady Singleton, you have been so very, very gay during the past week," exclaimed Miss Jukes. "But then, you know, you are so much sought after, such a favourite."

"Well, perhaps I am, my dear," said Lady Singleton, complacently. "Society is very kind to me, society spoils me; I am its pet child."

"Rayther a old child — up'ards of fifty, I take it," muttered Crimp to himself.

"What did you say, Sir Nathan?" inquired Lady Singleton, with a bland smile that showed her false teeth.

"I was a-saying, ma'am, that I shouldn't have took your ladyship to be more than five or six and thirty, there or thereabouts," responded the bailiff.

"Well, I never!" ejaculated Miss Jukes, as if lost in amazement. "Did you ever know such an accurate guess? Really, Sir Nathan, you must be quite a wizard to have hit so fully upon the truth respecting my dear Lady Singleton's age."

"Lord bless ye, ma'am," cried Mr. Crimp, winking at Miss Jukes in a very knowing manner, "I'm one of the downiest coves at that there kind of thing in all England. But about our dear Mrs. Fitzherbert — I s'pose you've both on you the greatest esteem and respeck for that lady."

"I would go to the end of the world to serve her," exclaimed Lady Singleton, emphatically.

"And I'll be bound to say t'other lady would go to the devil for the same purpose?" remarked the bailiff, pointing his dirty forefinger at Miss Jukes.

"I certainly would go very great lengths for Mrs. Fitzherbert," said the toady. Then, getting up under pretence of poking the fire, she whispered rapidly in the ears of her patroness, "Depend upon it, this is a sporting baronet, a regular country squire."

"Just so, my dear," returned Lady Singleton, in the same low and quick tone. "Very vulgar, but very rich, I dare say."

Miss Jukes looked her assent to this opinion on the part of her patroness and resumed her seat.

"By the bye," said Lady Singleton, "I wonder whether it can be really true that Mrs. Fitzherbert has broken altogether with the prince, or whether she has merely taken a separate establishment in consequence of the approaching marriage of his Royal Highness? Which do you think it is, my dear?" asked the lady, appealing to Miss Jukes.

"I should really like to hear your opinion first, my beloved friend," said the companion, in a tone of deferential entreaty.

"Well, I will frankly confess that I think the separation is only feigned on account of the approaching marriage," replied Lady Singleton.

"And I agree with you perfectly," exclaimed Miss Jukes, who would have said precisely the same had her patroness adopted the other opinion upon the subject. "And now perhaps Sir Nathan will give us his ideas —"

"We'll come to that pint in a moment, ladies," interrupted the sheriff's-officer. "I'm quite delighted to hear that your friendship for Mrs. Fitzherbert is so great."

"There is no sacrifice I would not make for her," exclaimed Lady Singleton. "She should command all my fortune, were she ever unfortunately placed in a situation to require such a manifestation of my love and esteem. You know, Miss Jukes, that I am sincere in what I now say."

"I can conscientiously bear testimony to the truth of your ladyship's declarations," said the toady; "and no one can appreciate more deeply than myself the value, fidelity,

and generous disinterestedness of your ladyship's friendship. In fact, — I do not say it to flatter your ladyship, because I hate flattery — "

"I know you do, my dear," observed the wealthy widow, quite seriously. "But do tell me what you were about to say, even if it were to reproach me with some fault or failing."

"Well, my dear friend," resumed Miss Jukes, adopting a tone of bland remonstrance and a look of gentle deprecation, "I am going to be candid with you, and I am about to reproach you with a fault. In fact, you have one very great failing, and that is, you are too generous. You will really ruin yourself outright if you go on in this manner. Your purse is constantly open, your hand is always in your pocket. A friend requires a loan, a poor relation craves assistance, the miserable and wretched of the lower orders beseech eleemosynary assistance, and you never refuse; I do believe you could not say, 'Nay.' Now I think, Sir Nathan," added Miss Jukes, turning toward the sheriff's-officer, "you will admit with me that her ladyship does possess a very great failing, and that I was in the right to reproach her with it, even at the risk of her friendship."

"Well, I don't think her ladyship will feel herself so aggrawated as to get up and punch your head for them remarks," said the bailiff, who did not, however, see through the disgusting flattery and sickening fulsomeness of Miss Jukes's proceeding. "But I'm as happy as a sand-boy to hear that her ladyship is so unkimmon generous: 'cos vy, if you'll on'y just read that there letter which the flunkey laid on the table — "

"I did not perceive any letter, Sir Nathan," exclaimed Lady Singleton. "Did you, Miss Jukes?"

"Oh, here it is," cried the toady, picking it up from the carpet on which it had fallen. "It is addressed to your ladyship, and is in the never-to-be-forgotten but ever-to-be-admired hand-writing of our beloved friend, Mrs. Fitzherbert."

"Be so kind as to read it, my dear," said Lady Singleton.

"Certainly," returned Miss Jukes, with a most amiable smile; and she proceeded to read the contents aloud in the ensuing manner:

"'I know, my dearest Lady Singleton, that you will be

surprised to receive from me such a request as the one I am about to make; but I likewise feel that I may address myself in full confidence to your friendship. I have not time to enter into particulars; but I will explain everything when we next meet. What I require is the loan of a couple of thousand guineas for a week or ten days, to save me from a most painful difficulty.' "

"Good Heavens! is this possible?" exclaimed Lady Singleton, snatching the note from the hands of the toady. "Yes, here is her signature, and 'tis her handwriting beyond all possibility of doubt. To what difficulty does she allude, Sir Nathan, and why cannot you advance the money, since you are an intimate friend and doubtless a rich man?"

"I advance the blunt!" cried Crimp, throwing himself back in his chair and bursting into an uproarious fit of laughter. "Well, I'm damned if ever I heard anything better than that. By jingo! it beats cock-fighting hollow. I advance the tin! Ha! ha! ha!"

"And wherefore should you not, Sir Nathan?" demanded Lady Singleton, now looking uncommonly demure, and even exchanging a suspicious glance with Miss Jukes.

"Why, because it would be rayther too good," responded Crimp. "But I suppose you'll make no difficulty in writing out a cheque which I'll run off and get keshed at the banker's at once —"

"You are really very accommodating, sir," interrupted Lady Singleton. "Don't you think he is, Miss Jukes?"

"I never knew any one more so," answered the companion.

"Come, now, no palavering about the matter," exclaimed Crimp. "You've told me how much you love Mrs. Fitzherbert, and how you'd sacrifice all your fortune to do her a service, and now the opportunity presents itself. 'Cos I'll be very candid with you, ma'am, and therefore the truth is that there's a writ out against Mrs. Fitzherbert for two thousand pounds and odd; and if so be she don't settle in an hour or so, she'll have to go to a lockup."

"Then her rupture with the prince is complete?" cried Lady Singleton and Miss Jukes, as if speaking in the same breath.

"I'm afeard it be," said Crimp. "The more's the pity, 'cos now the dear lady's on'y chance is in the good feelin's of her friends."

"And pray, Sir Nathan, why do you not pay the money, I ask once more?" exclaimed Lady Singleton, drawing her prim form up to the full extent of its demure lankiness.

"I can't make out why you and t'other lady keep on calling me, Sir, Nathan," said Crimp; "'cos you'd better know the truth at vonce, and then you'll see why it isn't possible for me to come down with the stumpy. In a vord, then, I'm the hofficer which has made the caption, and my man has got Mrs. Fitzherbert in custody at this present speaking. Now, then —"

"What! you are not a baronet, then?" shrieked Lady Singleton, starting to her feet and surveying Mr. Nathan Crimp with mingled disgust and suspicion.

"Nor even a knight?" screamed Miss Jukes, rushing to the bell.

"Neither von nor t'other, and be damned to them!" was Mr. Crimp's very emphatic ejaculation. "But what is all this pother about?"

"Leave the room, sir!" cried Lady Singleton.

"Yes, be off with you!" exclaimed Miss Jukes, ringing the bell frantically.

"But what answer shall I convey back to Mrs. Fitzherbert?" demanded Crimp, dismayed at the sudden turn which the aspect of affairs had taken.

"I deeply regret, sir, that I have no money to lend," said Lady Singleton, in a severe tone. "Mrs. Fitzherbert is an extravagant woman, and she must pay the penalty of her thoughtlessness."

"To be sure!" cried Miss Jukes. "It serves her quite right."

"She is a proud upstart," continued Lady Singleton.

"And therefore her fall is merited," observed the toady.

"She can go to prison, for anything I care," exclaimed the worthy lady.

"And she may rot there too, without my breaking my heart on her account," added Miss Jukes.

At this moment the door was opened, and the hall-porter, accompanied by two tall footmen in gorgeous liveries, rushed into the room, the violent ringing of the bell having alarmed them.

"Turn that person out of the house," exclaimed Lady

Singleton, pointing with unmitigated disgust at the baniff. "He is an impostor."

"A thorough impostor," echoed Miss Jukes.

"And if Mrs. Fitzherbert should call or send," continued Lady Singleton, "mind that I am not at home."

"And never shall be at home any more to Mrs. Fitzherbert or any one from her," added Miss Jukes, with a look of bland appeal to her patroness.

"Quite correct, my dear," said Lady Singleton, tossing her head indignantly. "I always thought that Mrs. Fitzherbert was a low creature and no credit as an acquaintance."

"Yes, and you always said as much to me, I am sure," cried Miss Jukes. "The airs that she has given herself, and the way she has come down! It's quite a judgment on her for her frailty," added Miss Jukes, who had three bastard children living at a farmhouse in the country.

"You're right, my dear, it's a visitation of Providence on her head for her sins," remarked Lady Singleton, whose profligacy in her younger days was notorious to all but her besotted husband; and he, good easy man, believed her to be a paragon of virtue.

But we must leave this immaculate lady and her equally well-principled "companion" to pass their comments upon the fallen Mrs. Fitzherbert, while we follow Mr. Nathan Crimp, who, having been very unceremoniously bundled out of Lady Singleton's mansion, proceeded in the hackney-coach to the not less splendid abode of the Dowager-Marchioness of Banbury in Park Lane.

During the ride thither Mr. Crimp revolved in his mind which was the best course to adopt; and it struck him that on this occasion he would represent himself as the mere messenger entrusted with a confidential communication, and in that capacity await the result. Accordingly, on arriving at the gate of Lady Banbury's superb dwelling, he gave a modest ring, and assumed no airs when questioned by a porter clad in such a radiant livery that if the sun had happened to be shining at the time the presence of that magnificent specimen of flunkeyism must have been perfectly bewildering.

"Walk in, my good fellow," said this tremendous individual, addressing Mr. Crimp with the most patronizing urbanity. "Sit down in the hall; don't be afraid, we sha'n't

eat you up, although I dessay the appearance of such a place must be rather overpowering to one unaccustomed to such splendour. Ah! poor man, I pity you, dweller in some back slums as you no doubt are."

"It's exceedin' kind of you to sympathize with me," observed Mr. Crimp, who could have said, if he had chosen, that he had a well-furnished house of his own in Chancery Lane; but as he was resolved to try the effect of humility in the present instance, he followed the porter into the marble hall with as much apparent deference as a pauper is compelled to show to the pompous beadle who conducts the wretched being to the workhouse.

"And now where's the letter?" demanded the porter.

"Here, sir," replied Mr. Nathan Crimp.

The countenance of the porter brightened up in an instant when he heard himself addressed as "Sir;" and, patting Mr. Crimp upon the shoulder in a paternal manner, he said, "Now I'll be bound that you'd like to obtain an audience of the marchioness herself?"

"I should, indeed," was the bailiff's prompt reply.

"You shall then, my good feller, you shall, I can assure you," resumed the porter. "Here, George," he cried, raising his voice to its highest key.

"What is it?" demanded a handsome youth of about sixteen or seventeen, and who was dressed as a page. "Did you call, Mr. Blossom?" he said, as he emerged from a waiting-room that opened from the marble hall.

"Georgey, my boy," said the porter, who appeared to rejoice in the name of Blossom, "you will have the kindness to conduct this individual into the presence of her ladyship. He has an important communication to make to her."

"Very good, Mr. Blossom," said the handsome page. "Follow me, my man," he observed, turning toward Crimp.

Up a splendid staircase they went, across a landing crowded with statues, vases, and pictures, along a passage lighted from the ceiling, and then into an antechamber where a couple of pages as handsome and as elegantly clad as George himself were lounging before the fire. One leaf of a pair of folding-doors was instantaneously thrown open by Crimp's guide, and the bailiff was ushered into a magnificent drawing-room, where an elderly lady was seated alone at one of the tables interspersed about.

The page advanced with noiseless step toward her, made a low obeisance, and said, "May it please your ladyship, a person has called upon some important business."

The lady raised her eyes, darted a rapid and scarcely perceptible look of mingled fondness and lascivious intelligence upon the beautiful youth, and then fixed her eyes upon Mr. Nathan Crimp, who respectfully placed Mrs. Fitzherbert's letter before her.

The handsome page withdrew, and the bailiff now found himself alone with the Dowager-Marchioness of Banbury. She was a lady in her fiftieth year, retaining all the traces of a beauty that must have been transcendently marvellous in her youthful days, but with a countenance modelled in a style that denoted the strongest passions. This sensuality of facial outline and general expression was, however, moderated, though not altogether subdued, by the unassuming, indeed, the extremely plain apparel which the marchioness wore; and that comparative homeliness of dress contrasted strangely with the costly elegance which characterized the spacious apartment wherein she was seated.

"What is your business, my good man?" she inquired, in a soft voice and mild demeanour.

"Please your ladyship, I've brought this here letter from Mrs. Fitzherbert," said Mr. Nathan Crimp; "and as it's private and confidential — "

"Ah! I understand," interrupted the marchioness, her whole countenance becoming suddenly animated with delight. "Then you are doubtless acquainted with the nature of its contents?"

"To be sure I be, your ladyship," was the response.

"And the favour, then, is granted, and the two thousand guineas will be accepted?" exclaimed the marchioness, speaking in a confidential tone.

"How on earth could your ladyship guess — "

"Hush! not a word!" said the dowager, putting her finger upon her lip, while the sheriff's officer, stopping short in his exclamations, gazed upon the lady with open-mouthed, staring, stolid wonder. "Sit down, my good man, sit down," she said, pointing toward a chair. "You are evidently a person enjoying the confidence of my beloved, valued, and very dearest friend, Mrs. Fitzherbert. I suppose, therefore, that you occupy some situation in her household? Or, per-

haps," added the marchioness, lowering her voice to the most mysterious whisper, "perhaps you are employed in the War Office?"

"Not quite that, ma'am," responded Mr. Nathan Crimp, "although I do hold a hofficial capacity, as the sayin' is."

"Ah! I thought as much," ejaculated the marchioness, looking very sly and very cunning indeed. Then, as she took up the letter which the bailiff had laid upon the table, she said, "Well, I am really delighted to think that Mrs. Fitzherbert should have used such despatch in complying with my request. It is a proof of friendship on her part which I shall never, never forget, and she may always rely upon my gratitude in return. Indeed, without this proof of her good feeling, I shall ever have remained the most devoted, the most sincere, the most faithful of her friends. And I am still more charmed at the promptitude of her compliance with my request, inasmuch as it fully proves the falsity of the idle tittle-tattle which is now current concerning her, and which represents the rupture between herself and the prince as complete; whereas I all along declared my firm conviction to be that it was only a concession judiciously made to public opinion, on the eve of an event which so closely regards the national interests — I mean the approaching marriage of his Royal Highness with the Princess Caroline of Brunswick."

"I'm very much afeard that your ladyship is labouring under some mistake or another," said Mr. Nathan Crimp, who had listened with increasing bewilderment to the long speech just delivered.

"What mistake? How can there be any error?" exclaimed the Marchioness of Banbury, now puzzled in her turn. "The matter is as plain and simple as possible; and since you are a person enjoying the confidence of my beloved friend, Mrs. Fitzherbert, I will explain it to you in a moment. Then the two thousand pounds shall be immediately forthcoming."

"That's exactly what I want, please your ladyship," cried the bailiff, chuckling at the thought of fingering so much coin and indulging in the gratifying expectation of receiving from Mrs. Fitzherbert at least a twenty-pound note for himself.

" Well, then, you see that there can be no error," resumed the marchioness; " because if you are empowered to receive the amount just named, it is quite clear that the transaction is complete, and this note, which dear Mrs. Fitzherbert has sent me by you and which I will now at once proceed to open, unquestionably contains the intelligence — "

" It relates to the two thousand guineas, sure enough," exclaimed Mr. Crimp. " But as for my service in return, or any transaction completed, I'm as entirely at sea as your ladyship seems to be yourself."

" This is most extraordinary! " cried the dowager. " Do let us understand each other, even before I open this letter. It will be much better."

" So I think, ma'am," observed Mr. Nathan Crimp. " Well, then, you speak fust, and tell me what your notion of the business is."

" It lies in a nutshell, my good man," said her ladyship. " The day before yesterday I wrote to Mrs. Fitzherbert requesting her to use her great influence to obtain a regiment for my second son, Lieutenant-Colonel Lord Willesden. In that note I hinted that if Mrs. Fitzherbert knew any poor person to whom she would like to present a couple of thousand pounds, that sum should be placed at her disposal for such a purpose. And now, therefore, you perceive that the transaction is doubtless completed, and that you have been sent to give a receipt for the amount just named."

" Then your ladyship was never more mistaken in your life," exclaimed Crimp; " although I dessay that if you will only assist Mrs. Fitzherbert in her present difficulties, she'll get your son made not only a colonel, but also a harchbishop, whenever she rekivers her power over the prince."

" What do I hear? What do you mean? " cried the Dowager-Marchioness of Banbury, rising from her seat and now drawing herself up with all the stately haughtiness which England's insolent aristocracy know so well how to assume. " Mrs. Fitzherbert has lost her influence, you say, and she is involved in troubles? "

" Terrible ones, may it please your ladyship," exclaimed Crimp. " Be so kind as to perooge her letter."

" It is scarcely necessary," observed the marchioness, tossing the missive away from her with mingled aversion and disgust. " You can tell me in a few words what the

woman wants with me, although I now more than half-suspect."

"She hopes and trusts that your ladyship, for friendship's sake, will lend her a couple of thousand guineas for a few days," exclaimed Mr. Crimp, in as meek and humble a tone as he could possibly bring himself to adopt, although he had a presentiment that his visit to the marchioness would prove at last as abortive as his appeal to Lady Singleton.

"Friendship!" ejaculated the dowager, her face becoming purple with anger. "How dared the upstart, Mrs. Fitzherbert, to represent herself as the friend of the Marchioness of Banbury? No, thank God! there was never any friendship between us. I tolerated the woman, and that was all. But I always despised her vanity and foresaw that her pride would have a fall; and I am glad that the catastrophe has occurred. It will be a lesson to such women in future. Indeed, I am much to blame that I ever permitted a person of such a loose character and such disreputable morals to cross my threshold. Good morning to you."

And the marchioness stalked away, with the majestic bearing of an empress, to the farther end of the room, while Mr. Crimp sneaked off as discomfited and crestfallen as he well could be.

On regaining the hackney-coach, he was on the point of desiring the driver to return to Mrs. Fitzherbert's house, for he had no courage to apply in any other quarter on her behalf; but a second thought prompting him to give the experimental affair one more trial, he hastily examined the addresses of the four remaining letters, and selected the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery as the next personage to be applied to. Mr. Nathan Crimp accordingly drove to Grafton Street; and on alighting at the splendid mansion to which the reader has been already introduced on a former occasion, he rang the bell, delivered the letter, and quietly seated himself in the hall to await the result.

A quarter of an hour elapsed, and at the expiration of this interval the footman who had taken charge of the note reappeared with a request that Mrs. Fitzherbert's messenger would step up-stairs. This invitation struck Mr. Crimp as a favourable augury, and it was with considerable alacrity that he followed the gorgeously clad domestic to an apartment where the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery was

seated in company with half a dozen ladies of rank and fashion.

The dowager-countess herself was a very fine woman, considering her age, which was assuredly verging toward sixty, despite of the exquisite skill wherewith the appliances of art were used to conceal the ravages of time. In her earlier years she must have been as eminently handsome as the Marchioness of Banbury; indeed, every feature of her countenance and every contour of her person retained the traces of former beauty. Her large dark eyes were piercing as arrows and still full of fire; and in her face was reflected the indomitable decision of her character. Haughty, proud, selfish, and unprincipled, she was one of those heartless women who care not, so long as they can achieve the aggrandizement of their families, if millions of hard-working Englishmen should perish of starvation. She was, indeed, a veritable type of the British peeress, narrow-minded, prejudiced, intolerant, luxurious, avaricious, extravagant, and cold-blooded to a degree. In her younger days she had been an intriguant in love; now she meddled in politics. She hated "the people" as cordially as she could; she firmly believed in the divine right of kings; she looked upon Charles I as a martyr, and she thought that the "lower orders" were only fitted to remain the serfs and slaves of the "upper classes." And these are sentiments of ninety-nine out of every hundred ladies in the higher grades of English society.

On the present occasion, the dowager-countess had several titled visitresses staying with her in Grafton Street. They were all of high rank and great wealth, and they therefore despised every one who had not the same claims to consideration. The pride of each was sufficient to fill infinite space; the virtue of each might be compressed without much difficulty into the smallest pill-box. For be it well understood, and we proclaim this has our honest, sincere, and deliberate conviction, that, with a few honourable exceptions, the titled ladies of this land are the most lascivious demireps in morals, the vilest hypocrites in religion, the most ostentatious counterfeits in their so-called benevolence, the most heartless tyrants to their inferiors, and the most cordial haters of the working classes that can possibly exist. Prudes in seeming, they are generally prostitutes in sooth; and the

scandalous laxity of their morals is displayed by the fact that numbers of the proudest families in the aristocratic sphere make a glory and a boast of being descended from the shameless and disgusting harlots who flourished as the mistresses of Charles II.

But to continue. It was in the splendid apartment where the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery was seated with her guests that Mr. Nathan Crimp was shown. He was taken considerably aback on finding himself thus suddenly ushered into the presence of four or five elderly ladies, all wearing huge turbans, and seated in a kind of awful grandeur upon the crimson velvet sofas, while three or four younger ladies were grouped in the bay-window and reading Mrs. Fitzherbert's letter with very great attention. But Mr. Crimp made his politest bow, ran his fingers through his greasy hair, crushed his hat under his arm, and endeavoured to look at his ease, though in reality he felt as uncomfortable as if he were going forth on a public scaffold to be hanged.

"Pray what is your name, my man?" asked the most majestic-looking lady of the whole assemblage, and whom the bailiff therefore instantaneously set down in his own mind as the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery.

"My name's Crimp, Nathan Crimp, at your ladyship's service," was the prompt reply.

"And pray what has happened to our dear friend, Mrs. Fitzherbert?" inquired the dowager-countess. "She alludes to some difficulty of a painful nature, and we are all dying with suspense to learn the terrible, sad truth."

"Well, it is sad enow, Heaven knows," exclaimed Mr. Crimp, flattering himself that he had at last fallen in with sympathetic souls, and that the advance of pecuniary supplies would necessarily follow.

"I suppose, then, that the dear creature — I mean, our excellent friend, Mrs. Fitzherbert, has altogether broken off with a certain illustrious personage?" remarked one of the ladies, apparently addressing herself to the dowager-countess, but in reality levelling her observation in an interrogatory sense at Mr. Nathan Crimp.

"I dare say this person can tell you, my dear Lady Brunel," said the dowager-countess; "for he seems to be in the confidence of our unfortunate friend."

"Well, ladies, I'm afeard there ain't much doubt on that

pint," observed Mr. Crimp. "The truth is, you see, Mrs. Fitzherbert is regularly done up, just for the moment; and the little request she makes in that there letter which them there young ladies is a-perooging will save her from a wery orkard dilemmy, if so be the faviour which she rekvires is granted."

"Oh, we will attend to that part of the matter all in due time," exclaimed the dowager-countess, assuming a tone and look of such remarkable condescension that Mr. Nathan Crimp felt as certain relative to the two thousand guineas as if he had them already buttoned up in his breeches pocket.

"What her ladyship wishes," said one of the elderly dames, likewise speaking in a bland tone and also unbending amazingly from the prim stateliness and icy rigidity which seems natural to her, "what her ladyship wishes," she repeated, glancing toward the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery, "is to receive a full, frank, and candid explanation of those painful embarrassments which she is so urgently called upon to alleviate."

"Nothing can be more fairer or more straightfor'ard," exclaimed the sheriff's officer. "Well, then, the truth is, saving your ladyship's presence, that there's a writ out again Mrs. Fitzherbert for two thousand guineas and up'ards, and all her servants has bolted off like shots, leaving the poor lady in a awful state."

"God bless me!" ejaculated the dowager-countess, shaking her head ominously. "How I do pity her, the poor dear creature!"

"I really could cry," exclaimed Lady Brunel.

"And I am crying," said the elderly dame who had just now spoken; "it is heart-breaking," she added, applying her handkerchief to her eyes.

The greatest sensation certainly prevailed in that room; and while the elder ladies manifested the most absorbing interest in Mr. Nathan Crimp's communications, the younger ones gathered nearer to him in order not to lose a word that might fall from his lips.

"And so our dearest friend is thus cruelly abandoned by all the world?" said the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery.

"If it wasn't for my man Jack which is bearin' her company," returned Mr. Crimp, "she would be all alone in that house of hern at this blessed minute."

"Ah! you have a man there, then?" exclaimed Lady Brunel, who was the first to suspect what Mr. Crimp's calling really was, her eldest son having more than once fallen into the hands of the harpies of the law and she having visited him in a sponging-house on one occasion.

"Yes, my man's at Mrs. Fitzherbert's," said Crimp, "and if the debt isn't paid presently she'll have to go to my lockup in Chancery Lane. That's the naked truth, ladies, savin' your presence."

"Pray who are you, my good man?" demanded the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery; "for you seem to take so deep an interest in everything which concerns my dear friend, Mrs. Fitzherbert."

"I do suspect he's what's called a sheriff's officer," whispered Lady Brunel.

"I should faint at the bare notion," shrieked the elderly lady who a minute ago had pretended to whimper in commiseration of Mrs. Fitzherbert's misfortunes. "Pray put me out of suspense at once, and ask that dreadful man what he really is."

"Who are you?" demanded Lady Brunel, addressing the query in a somewhat sharp and imperious tone to Mr. Crimp.

"I'm the bailiff what's arrested Mrs. Fitzherbert," was the answer; "and it's out of sheer good natur' and 'cos I pities her case that I've gone the rounds of her friends to see what they'll do for her."

"Ah! then you have been elsewhere this morning on Mrs. Fitzherbert's behalf?" exclaimed the dowager-countess, interrogatively.

"Indeed I have, may it please your ladyship, and with no success at all," said Crimp, wondering how much longer it would be ere the expected loan was forthcoming.

"Pray where have you been, my man?" asked Lady Brunel; and every head was now stretched forward with eager curiosity to enable the ear to catch every syllable of Crimp's reply, whatever it might be.

"I went fust to Lady Singleton, next to the Marchioness of Banbury, and now I'm here," he said, in a measured manner; "and I hope and expect that I've got the right sow by the tail at last."

"What does the fellow mean?" exclaimed the Dowager-

Countess of Montgomery, suddenly throwing off the mask of mildness and assuming a demeanour full of indignation. "But it is just like the insufferable impertinence of Mrs. Fitzherbert to send such a coarse vulgarian on her beggarly messages."

"She's fallen from her pedestal at last," ejaculated Lady Brunel.

"And she will never remount it again," observed the elderly lady, who was whimpering at one moment, fainting the next, and now chuckling over the ruin of a fellow creature.

"Well, this is a catastrophe," exclaimed one of the young ladies.

"She who only a few weeks ago was so much envied," observed another honourable miss.

"And with whom any of us would have so cheerfully changed places," cried a third.

"But it is just what we all expected," remarked Lady Brunel, "and, indeed, what Mrs. Fitzherbert herself most richly deserves."

"Her pride has been most detestable," exclaimed the dowager-countess, tossing her head indignantly.

"And then her character, her example, positive contamination," cried Lady Brunel. "I hope God will forgive me for having ever allowed my daughters to speak to such a creature."

"You may go, fellow," observed the dowager-countess, flinging the intimation at poor Crimp with that sovereign insolence of which a member of England's arrogant aristocracy is alone capable.

And, more utterly crestfallen than ever, the poor devil slunk out of the splendid mansion, as if he had been detected in the commission of a theft. He only breathed freely when, safely ensconced once more in the hackney-coach, he was borne out of sight of the patrician palace in which so flagrant a specimen of aristocratic heartlessness had been added to his experiences of human life.

And now, while Lady Singleton and Miss Jukes were discussing a succulent lunch and pouring into each other's bosoms certain little confidences by no means corroborative of their good morals, while, in the second place, the sanctified-looking Dowager-Marchioness of Banbury was toying with one of her handsome pages on the drawing-room sofa, and

while, in the third place, the old Countess of Montgomery and her lady companions were commenting, with a true enjoyment and a lively zest, upon the downfall of Mrs. Fitzherbert and laughing at the success with which they drew Mr. Crimp out and gleaned from him all those particulars that now furnished food for so much pleasant discussion, while such, we say, were the proceedings in the several houses visited that day by the bailiff, this individual himself was returning, melancholy and dispirited, to the almost deserted dwelling of Mrs. Fitzherbert.

It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon when he alighted from the hackney-coach at the termination of his fruitless mission. On ascending to the apartment where he had left Mrs. Fitzherbert in the custody of his man Jack, he found the unhappy lady pacing the room in a condition of the most nervous suspense, while his follower was seated near the fire, contemplating the blazing coals with an air of indifference to all beside.

The failure of Mr. Crimp's errand was instantaneously read by Mrs. Fitzherbert in his face, and, clasping her hands together, she fell upon her knees, exclaiming, with frantic wildness, "Oh, do not take me to prison, I implore you not to drag me hence! Grant me a few days' license — "

"Calm yourself, ma'am," interrupted Mr. Nathan Crimp; "you ain't a-going to quod, on'y to my lockup house."

"But that is almost as bad as a prison," she exclaimed with a rending emphasis in her words and despair in her looks.

"Well, ma'am, I'll make yer as comfortable as I can; but there you must go, and at vunce, too. None of your friends won't do nuffin for you."

"Friends, indeed!" ejaculated Mrs. Fitzherbert, bitterly, as she rose from her suppliant posture. "The unfortunate have no friends; on the contrary, I dare believe that many and many a heart, lately so full of envious and jealous feelings, will now rejoice at my downfall. Ah, I see by your looks that such is already the case," she cried, reading in the expression of the bailiff's countenance the confirmation of her most galling fears. "But I will not now shrink from making one more trial of love and friendship," she added, with increasing bitterness of tone and excitement of manner,

" and this last experiment shall be tested from the lockup house, which is the threshold of the debtor's gaol."

" Well, ma'am, what have you resolved upon? " inquired Mr. Crimp, who, as the reader may have seen, did not possess a bad heart, although the very nature of his calling had rendered selfishness the prominent feature in his character.

" I have resolved upon accompanying you forthwith," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, now speaking with the firmness of desperation, while her lips were as colourless as her cheeks. " I have also determined upon allowing forty-eight hours to elapse without making another effort to procure my liberation, so that the whole metropolis may learn what has happened, and thus have leisure to comment upon the generosity, manliness, and affection of him who permits all this to take place. Yes, forty-eight hours shall elapse in that manner," she cried, with a virulent bitterness in her tone, and a glare of frenzy in her eyes; " and then, if no notice be taken of me in a certain quarter, then, I say, I will send and demand as a right what I never would have accepted, much less besought, as a boon."

Having thus spoken, Mrs. Fitzherbert repaired to her own chamber; and while Crimp waited outside in the passage to assure himself that she did not give him the slip, the once courted and almost worshipped lady performed her unassisted toilet.

No tears now traced their pearly path adown her cheeks; her eyes seemed to burn with the light of frenzy, and her face was flushed with the hectic glow of fever. The pulsations of her heart were rapid and abrupt; the heavings of her bosom proved this. There was something awful about her, as if she had reached that crisis of her destiny when suicide was an alternative as conspicuous to her view as the chance of redemption from her difficulties. In her brain was a sensation of hurry and confusion; she felt as never before she had felt, either in the head or in the heart.

At length her toilet was completed, and apparelled in the most unpretending garb, she issued forth from her chamber. In her purse there were a few shillings; in a little casket there were a few jewels. But all her most precious gems, as well as her plate and other valuables, were already in pledge; and thus was it that, standing upon the very verge of pauper-

ism, friendless and alone, unattended by even a domestic, and unaccompanied by even such sympathy as a hired abigail might have bestowed, the once brilliant and magnificent Mrs. Fitzherbert entered the hackney-coach, and was driven off to the sponging-house in Chancery Lane.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MONSTER - MAN

AGAIN have we a scene of horror to depict; once more must we seek the churchyard by night, when the moon is shining pure and cold, and the silver stars spangle the deep blue vault of heaven.

'Twas twelve o'clock, midnight, that hour when even the revellers over the wine-cup look at each other to imply that the moment for breaking up the orgy is at hand; when the daughter of crime begins to think it fruitless to pace the street any longer or later that night, and turns her weary steps toward the abode of pollution which she denominates her "home;" when the desperate suicide seeks the bridge from which the fatal plunge may be made without the fear of molestation at such an hour; when the convict in the doomed cell of Newgate counts the stroke of St. Sepulchre's clock, and calculates with a heavy, oh, so heavy a heart, that he has only eight hours more to live; when the Cabinet Minister rises from the table in his private office, where he has been concocting some fresh invasion upon the popular rights, and some new element of wealth, monopoly, or influence for the greedy, griping, heartless aristocracy; when the gambler is just beginning to feel excited with the ruinous play which he proposes to continue until daybreak; when the gorged alderman turns and moans upon a couch which, though of down, is made comfortless by indigestion, and when the poor starving wretch tosses in his miserable garret whence famine repels even the advance of that slumber which costs nothing; when the lean, pining, perishing needlewoman snuffs her solitary candle and sighs over the work which she dares not lay aside until she shall have pushed her heart-breaking toils further and still deeper into

the cold, cold night; when the burglar steals abroad, with pistols and crape-mask, skeleton-keys and dark lantern, to do his dangerous, desperate work; when music resounds through the saloons of rank, wealth, and fashion, and the roseate floods of luxury gush forth from the joints in gilded shutters and between the folds of velvet curtains; when in attics, and cellars, and on the steps of street-doors, and in the entrances of courts, and under the dry arches of bridges and coal-wharfs are gathered those wretched outcasts of society and those innumerable beings whom monopoly in all its detestable shapes excludes from the great community of labour; and when, too, murder bares its red right hand and mingles its voice of terror with the dull moaning of the night-wind, — at this hour was it that the monster-man entered one of the churchyards in the northwestern suburb of London.

He was clad in that rough sailor-garb which he wore when last we beheld him at his diabolical work; and beneath his jacket he carried the implement that was so necessary to him in his nocturnal occupation.

On entering the churchyard he paused, he leaned against the gate over which he had just clambered, and, dropping the shovel from under his rough coat, he covered his countenance with his hands and groaned aloud in mortal agony.

"O God, what have I done that I should thus be made the sport of an infernal hallucination, the victim of a horrible nightmare? But is it true, oh, is it true that like a jackal I tear open the graves of the dead, and like a vampire I prey upon them? Yes, it is no dream, no delusion; 'tis a hideous, horrible, damnable reality, and even now, now, I feel the accursed influence creeping over me. Oh, it comes, it comes, slow and chilling at first, like the gradual coiling of a slimy snake around the limbs; and now it seems to burn on the surface of my flesh and tingle in my veins, as the sensation gains upon me. Oh, spare me, spare me!" exclaimed the wretched man, throwing up his arms in despair. "Spare me, spare me!" he cried, in a rending voice, as he stretched out his hands toward the moon, that shone like a crescent of silver. "But what can I do? How can I combat against my destiny? It is my fate which I am obeying: like Cain, am I stricken; like Judas, am I doomed; like the Wandering Jew, am I cursed. And yet what evil have I done? Cain

murdered his brother Abel; never, never have I shed a drop of human blood at all. Judas betrayed his Redeemer for thirty pieces of silver; but never did I wrong a friend. The Wandering Jew struck Christ when fainting beneath the weight of His cross, as He bore it to Mount Calvary; but I never disavowed my Saviour, never forgot to pray to him night and morning. Wherefore, then, am I doomed? Wherefore am I fated? Wherefore am I cursed? Oh, it is not God who has fastened his ban upon me; it is the world that has made me an outcast. I am not the victim of Heaven's wrath, but of society's injustice; I am not a sacrifice to the vengeance of Providence, but to the tyranny of man. I asked for work, and the demand was vain; I sought to eat the bread of industry, but starvation made its gaunt home beneath my roof. I was torn away by ruthless tyrants from all whom I loved and held dear; and God only knows all that I have since endured, all that I have since become. The thought drives me mad, mad, mad! Wife, where art thou? In the cold, silent grave repose thy remains. Children, where are ye? Oh, that some kind spirit would waft the answer to mine ears; for I have sought ye everywhere, my poor children, my beloved babes, and I can find ye not. No wonder, then, that I am mad, furiously mad, insanely, rabidly, raving mad."

And as the miserable wretch yelled forth these last words, he tore his hair, beat his breast violently, and dashed his open palms with all his might against his forehead, as if he sought to break in the wall of his brain.

There were houses near enough for him to have been overheard; but perhaps the inmates slept soundly, or peradventure those whom the cries disturbed might have deemed them to emanate from the tipsy folly of some drunkard reeling home.

The bat swept over the head of the monster-man, the owl hooted from the belfry of the church, and the raven croaked from the adjacent tree. Then all was still, all was silent; and the unhappy being leaned against the gate, statue-like, motionless.

Suddenly the influence which he had already felt creeping over him, that indomitable, irresistible influence which the monster-man regarded as his fate, his doom, the spell that urged him on to the accomplishment of a fearful destiny

this mysterious and scarcely comprehensible influence it was which now seized upon him as if it were an enormous hand of iron that clutched him, made him spring with an abrupt start from his reverie of profoundly absorbing woe, and endowed him with all the horrible vitality which was to concentrate its energies to the accomplishment of an infernal task.

With a yell of despair, for the miserable being felt and comprehended all the power and all the tendency of that influence which he could not resist, revolting and loathsome though it were, — he picked up his spade, sprang on to the nearest tomb, and thence began to pass from monument to monument and stone to stone in the same way as on a former occasion.

Frequently he stopped and listened; sometimes he lay down upon the flat stone of tumular masonry, and then his attention would be breathless as his terror was appalling. The perspiration would break out all over him; bathed in the sweat of his anguish, his limbs would nevertheless quiver and tremble as if with an icy chilliness. His hair would stand on end, his eyes would glare with the light of frenzy through the silver flood which the moon sent forth to fill the atmosphere. But when the cause of alarm — or, perhaps, in some instances, the fancied cause — had passed, how sudden would prove the relief experienced by the unhappy wretch. The breath would come freely again all in a moment, the limbs would recover their power, the blood would,circulate naturally,and the perspiration would seem to evaporate instantaneously. Then onward would he go, proceeding from tomb to tomb as before, now pausing to examine the ground between,then straining his eyes to examine the appearance of some grave in the distance,now giving vent to a sudden feeling of anguish in profound sobs, then remaining dumb,as if all his senses,all his faculties,were for the time absorbed in that influence which shed its mysterious and appalling spells upon him.

Oh, surely, surely the doom of that monster-man was very terrible. Surely he was some accursed being fulfilling a destiny of no common order.

But let us follow him now, as he pursues his way from one tumular elevation to another.

The moon is shining in all her silver purity, the stars are

keeping company with the vestal of the night. Into the strongest relief are thrown the salient features of the scene; into the darkest gloom are the shades flung. The striking contrast of the argentine brilliancy and the sombre depth is ever inseparable from a night thus splendidly moonlit; and amidst the light, the silence, and the picturesque aspect of the whole scene the dark form of that man moving from gravestone to gravestone has something ominous in its appearance.

But, ah! how he pauses again, and this time 'tis not to listen, 'tis not in terror. No, 'tis because he distinguishes a new-made grave, and he looks well to the nature of the intervening objects to assure himself how he may approach it in security.

As on the former occasion, he moves cautiously from tomb to tomb until he is close up to the verge of the mound so recently raised. It stood within a foot of a low tumular structure, the sides of which were of brickwork supporting a large stone horizontally placed and whereon an inscription was placed. Lying flat with his face downwards upon this monument, the midnight desecrator of churchyards was enabled to grope with his hands all about the immediate vicinage of the newly made grave, and at length finding a wire, for which he was evidently searching, he fingered it so delicately as to prevent the slightest vibration, and then clipped it asunder with the pair of scissors which he invariably carried about his person.

This being done, he fearlessly descended from the neighbouring tomb, detached a large portion of the wire, threw the piece away, and then began to hollow out the grave to which an occupant had so recently been assigned.

It now appeared as if an infernal energy inspired him. Like Samson when pulling down the edifice upon his own head and the head of his persecutors, the monster-man seemed to acquire from some mysterious and superhuman source an amount of strength equivalent to the task which he had in hand.

The perspiration poured off him, his garments were almost saturated with the moisture. As the moonlight streamed upon his countenance, the veins upon his brow appeared like knotted cords beneath his skin. Straining at every nerve, sweating at every pore, the monster-man pursued his toil

shovelling up the earth with incredible speed, and all the while swayed by a terror lest he should be detected in the horrible work.

At length the coffin was reached, the spade struck upon the lid, and the sound was as hollow as if the dead inside had spoken in sepulchral tones; a little more earth to shovel out, and then the way was cleared for the raising of the coffin. This was speedily accomplished; and when the long, narrow, sinister-shaped thing lay upon the mound of soil that had been thrown out, the monster-man forced off the lid with his spade. This was the work of a few moments; then the winding-sheet was torn away, and upon the marble countenance of an elderly man did the moonlight pour its silvery flood.

Yes, the corpse was that of a man long past the prime of life, and whose appearance must have been venerable during his latter years. He had not been dead many days, nor buried many hours; indeed, he looked as if he were but serenely sleeping, for as yet there was nothing loathsome in the aspect of the corpse.

For a few moments, nay, for upwards of a minute, did the monster-man gaze intently upon the face of the dead; and then a desperate struggle seemed suddenly to arise within his own breast, increasing, all in an instant, to a frightful pitch, as the sea when the squall sweeps over it is lashed up into surging billows quick as the eye can wink.

Was he battling with the wild hurricane of some passion claiming the mastery over him? Was he fighting against some ferocious craving which was rapidly acquiring strength and power? Was he warring with some demoniac instinct from which all his better feelings revolted? Yes, it must have been so; for he writhed fearfully, he twisted his form about as if it were a huge piece of rope that was thus undulating, he seemed like a piece cut out of a monstrous snake, and in which the vitality still manifested itself by torturing convulsions. Then dreadful moans escaped him, mingled with suffocating sobs; then he dashed his hands violently against his brow, then he clenched his fingers in his hair.

But the infernal passion gained upon him, the hellish influence was rapidly asserting its complete mastery. One desperate struggle more, one last tremendous effort to fling

off the serpent-coils that were closing in around him, one final attempt to breathe a prayer, and then —

Oh, then all that followed was hideous and horrible in the extreme; for suddenly seizing upon the spade which lay at his feet, the monster-man raised it savagely, brandished it ferociously, and then began to mutilate the corpse, with a spite as diabolical and a malignity as infernal as if he were a fiend avenging his own fall upon the human race.

And now the wretch gnashed his teeth, and ground them together, and sucked his lips, which were parched with a burning thirst. Then his tongue lolled out, and the foam gathered around his mouth, becoming bloody in a short time with the cracking of those lips so painfully parched. And the man's eyes glowered like those of a demon, yes, glowered and glared like red-hot cinders set in those sockets where eyes were wont to be.

And still he continued to hack and hew the corpse; still he pursued the infernal pastime. His loathing and repugnance had all disappeared, or, rather, had changed into a delirious pleasure and a maddening delight at the hellish game which he was thus playing. Then, so soon as he was tired of mutilating the body with the spade, he threw the implement from him, he stooped down, and with his hands did he tear away the lacerated flesh from the bones of the corpse.

Oh, it was a damnable pastime, an infernal sport. And the wretch chuckled heartily and laughed madly the while.

At length he desisted from this wanton, meaningless, and incomprehensible mutilation of the dead; and, all his feelings suddenly undergoing a tremendous reaction, he became a prey to mortal terror, unnerved, dispirited, robbed of all his energies, with a sensation as if the tide of life itself were ebbing away. Then he sank down in a state of total unconsciousness by the side of the corpse which he had torn from its coffin and so cruelly mangled.

For nearly two hours did this utter prostration last, two mortal hours, during which the man remained in a deep trance, giving not the slightest sign of life. Infuriate monster as he had that night proved himself to be, a child might now have slain him, so helpless and so insensible was he.

But all on a sudden, as if a cannon had been fired close by his ear, or as if the rod of a most powerful galvanic battery

had been applied to him, he started up. Consciousness returned not gradually, but with a marvellous abruptness; life flowed not back by gradient ripples into his heart, but poured in with a sudden volume that sent all the auxiliary rills coursing with lightning speed through the veins.

"O God! is it possible? Have I done it again?" he cried, or, rather, shrieked forth in his anguish, as his eyes, the moment they opened once more, encountered the mangled corpse, the violated coffin, the rent winding-sheet, the open grave, and all the ghastly features of the place which he had made the scene of his infernal revelry.

For a few instants he stood gazing upon the mutilated dead, appalled at the hideous evidences of his own demoniac conduct; then, seized with a sudden terror, he turned to fly from the spot. But, forgetting how ticklish was the ground on which he trod, he utterly neglected his wonted precaution of walking upon the tombstones.

The result of this obliviousness on his part was speedily made manifest; for scarcely had he rushed away from the immediate vicinage of the open grave and the mangled corpse when he trod upon the very wire a portion of which he had ere now cut so cautiously away.

There was an immediate explosion of the spring-gun with which that wire had connection; and a yell of agony burst from the lips of the monster-man as he received a dozen shot-wounds in various parts of his body.

An alarm was instantaneously raised in the neighbouring houses; lights were speedily seen to gleam at the windows and move about in those dwellings, and men's voices were heard calling to each other, as neighbour demanded of neighbour whether he had caught the ominous sound of the spring-gun and would hasten in search of the midnight desecrater of graves.

In a few minutes a dozen persons were hastening from different directions to the churchyard; and amongst the tombs did they unhesitatingly plunge, there being no longer any danger from the spring-gun, as its contents were discharged. Guided by the moonlight, they soon discovered the spot where the grave had been desecrated and the corpse mangled; but vainly did they search for the miscreant who had accomplished the diabolical work.

There were fresh marks of blood near the open grave;

those marks were traced to a distance of several yards, and on reaching the pathway which intersected the cemetery they were suddenly lost altogether.

The individuals engaged in this research separated in all directions to hunt down the wretch who had so long been carrying on this diabolical game, but who now appeared likely to fall into the hands of justice at last. It was evident from the blood-stains that he had been severely wounded; and the inference was therefore natural that his arrest must speedily follow.

But after beating about all the vicinage of the churchyard for upwards of an hour, after scrutinizing every nook and corner which the searchers could possibly think of, they found all their endeavours fruitless and all their hopes baffled.

The monster-man had escaped, leaving the open grave, the mangled corpse, and the shovel which he had used as dreadful evidences of his presence in that quarter; while the discharged spring-gun and the useless search seemed to afford confirmation for many a gossip's tale respecting the horrors and mysteries of vampirism.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PRINCE AND THE SHERIFF'S OFFICER

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, on the second day after the arrest of Mrs. Fitzherbert; and his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales was seated alone in his private apartment, busily engaged in perusing a long letter which he had received from a friend whom he had sent over to Germany for the especial purpose of making a true and faithful report of the personal appearance and intellectual qualities of the Princess Caroline of Brunswick.

His Royal Highness was attired in his morning-gown, a pair of looose breeches, stockings without garters, and slippers; and he was half-reclining in an indolent manner in an arm-chair near the fire, reading with the profoundest interest the document which he had just received from his emissary to Germany.

"Oh, good teeth," he murmured to himself; "well, I am glad of that. If there be one feature more lovely than another, it is the teeth. A beautiful face is spoiled by indifferent teeth. Give me a plain woman with good teeth in preference to a charming creature with bad teeth. Ah! poor Octavia Clarendon, what rows of pearls had she! But Pauline, too, yes, Miss Pauline has teeth equally fine. And I have lost sight of those girls entirely lately. Ever since that cursed masquerade affair, or, rather, the interruption at Mrs. Brace's house, I seem to have abandoned all idea of possessing Pauline. But, by Jove! it is only a seeming on my part; for now that some accident or another has recalled her image so vividly to my mind, I feel a sudden resuscitation of those desires which her charming appearance as the Flower Girl engendered in my soul. Ah! when the lustre of that masquerade-scene lighted her form in all

its splendour, how glorious was the symmetry of that shape, how stainless the arms and bosom, how full of elegance every attitude! On my soul, Pauline is lovelier and more desirable than her sister, — at least now that I have possessed her sister and that I long to possess herself. I cannot fix my mental vision upon Pauline's charms without being intoxicated with the halo of beauty and the perfume of love which seem to float around her. But, oh, to hear that musical voice of hers escape in joyous murmurs of pleasure through lips red as coral and moist with voluptuousness, to behold those blue eyes half-closing in the ecstasy of passion's transport, to feel her exquisite form vibrating with all the abandonment of a sensuous suppleness, oh, this were to be inundated with the bliss of paradise."

Then, closing his eyes and throwing back his head, the royal voluptuary gave himself up altogether to the delicious flood of ideas which the powers of an imagination so licentiously fervid had conjured up; and thus for a few minutes did he remain gloating on the picture which represented the innocent and beauteous Pauline succumbing to his desires and abandoning herself with a kindred ardour to his embraces.

But the circumstance of his emissary's document falling from his hand aroused him from that voluptuous dream; and, picking up the paper, he proceeded to scan and comment upon its contents.

"Well, my future wife possesses good teeth, and I have already said that I am glad of that. 'She is twenty-five years old:' just the age that I like when the lady herself is handsome. 'Her stature is middling; her bust good.' I wish she was tall, — tall and queenlike, as Georgiana, or tall and graceful, as Pauline. Ah! Pauline, Pauline! how does thine image keep recurring to my thoughts! But let me see what more my correspondent tells me of my future wife? 'Her person is altogether pleasing.' Why, that's entirely a matter of taste. For my part, I like women whose charms are matured and full, but without the least approach to coarseness. Let their beauties once verge upon coarseness, and I have done with them. 'Her accomplishments are numerous and exquisite.' Bah! with what accomplishments can this German princess be endowed that shall even equal those of our English ladies? But because she is a princess,

she must of course be paraded as a goddess of perfection. Well, so be it; 'tis a part of the humbug by which all royal personages profit. Kings and queens, princes and princesses, royal dukes and duchesses, must be represented as deities, or else king-worship would soon become extinct. And now what does my correspondent tell me next? That my future wife's 'appearance at court is majestic.' Pshaw! I won't believe it! Majestic, indeed, with a middling stature! No, no; if he had said 'elegant' and 'graceful,' well and good. There can be nothing majestic in her. A short woman only looks ridiculous when dressed up in the gaud and finery of a queen or princess. If once the phrase 'little queen,' or 'little princess' should come into vogue, and be applied to full-blown women instead of mere girls, the fact must be taken as a sign of the times, — a proof, indeed, that royalty is at a discount. But never mind. As I have often said before, the monarchical system will last my time out, and damn all the consequences! Ah! what have we next in this letter? 'The manner of her Royal Highness the Princess Caroline is characterized by sweetness, condescension, and affability.' She will need all her sweetness of temper to put up with my intrigues and infidelities, I can tell her. 'Her eyes are blue and full of intelligence.' Yes, and Pauline's eyes are blue, and in their delicious depths young Cupid dwells. Blue, deep blue, and rolling with a softly sensuous languor, those are Pauline's eyes. And now what is the next detail in my correspondent's missive? 'The princess's countenance is highly animated.' Never was description more vague. Animated with what? There is the countenance of Eleanor of Desborough, that breathes desire in every lineament; there is the countenance of Georgiana of Devonshire, that tells the tale of delicious wantonness in every feature. Then, too, there is the lovely Rose Foster, whose face reflects all the virginal purity of her soul; and there is Pauline's countenance again, in which a woman's dignity mingles with the expression of the amorous temperament which that dignity itself more than half-subdues. Well, now, all this is animation; and I'll be bound that my future wife possesses no animation so charming as any one of those faces which are uppermost in my memory. Ah! and of the four beauties whom I have named, one only has yielded, one only blessed me with her love. The three others

have all eluded my pursuit. Eleanor of Desborough abhors me, Rose Foster fears me, Pauline Clarendon despises me. And yet, if I had not been a fool, in every instance should I have triumphed. A little more persecution, and Eleanor must have been defeated somehow or another; a little more audacity with Rose, on one of the occasions when she was in my power, and her virginity would have been rifled; a little more perseverance with regard to Pauline, instead of losing sight of her altogether since the night of the masquerade, and who knows but that success would have awaited me in that quarter likewise? By Heaven! I will renew my endeavours after all three. Yes, the haughty but impassioned and glowing Eleanor of Desborough shall be mine. I told her that the love with which she had inspired me was changed into hatred, — I told her this on the occasion when Mrs. Fitzherbert burst upon our interview and marred my aim; but, oh, who could long cherish a feeling of hatred against that splendid creature, with her olive complexion, her glorious eyes so full of fire, and her superb form so preëminently characterized by dignity, grace, and love. Yes, and Rose Foster, the sweet, innocent, timid maiden, shall be mine likewise, even if I have to send to the extremities of the earth to find her out. Last, but not least, oh, no, not least, the divine Pauline shall bless my arms; and then no Oriental sultan will have revelled in beauties more exquisite than these."

Again did the Prince of Wales pause to gloat in imagination over the picture which he was thus conjuring up, and to feast his libidinous fancy upon the charms which he recalled in vivid detail to his memory.

"But once again," he murmured, at length, starting at the same time from the voluptuous reverie in which he was steeping his senses, "once again let me turn my attention to this document which I have received from Germany. Nevertheless, surely it must be a bad omen for my approaching marriage, when I can think so little upon her who is to become my wife and so much upon others whom I wish to enjoy as mistresses. Of a verity, the whole portraiture of the Princess Caroline, even with the colouring which my emissary has given to it, fascinates me not mightily. There are a few good details, but many unsatisfactory ones. 'Exquisite accomplishments' may mean nothing more than

drawing-room frivolities and courtly inanities; 'sweetness of manner' conveys the irresistible idea of silliness and want of dignity. But what says my correspondent of her dress? Oh, 'always evincing the most admirable taste.' Vague and inconclusive. But her hair? 'Of a light auburn, profuse, and generally worn in a style of simple elegance.' If any human being can tell whether this means in bands or ringlets, in bows or frizzed, then I'll consent to be stigmatized as the greatest fool in Christendom. Ah! I already experience a secret loathing, an unaccountable aversion, for this German princess who has been selected as my future wife. The feeling amounts to a presentiment which I cannot resist, a spell which fixes itself insuperably upon me, a superstition which I cannot shake off. Oh, if I who have plucked the fairest flowers in beauty's garden and crowned myself with the brightest gems won from the galaxy of female fashion, if I who have conquered so often and been baffled so seldom, and to whom the coldest chastity has suddenly become changed into the warmest passion and the sternest prudery into the most yielding softness, if such a man as I, the first gentleman in Europe as well as the most envied heir to a throne in the whole world, if I, in a word, am to be sacrificed to a coarse, silly-minded, common-looking creature, by the living God, all princess though she be, and doubly princess though she will become through her alliance with me, I will treat her worse than the veriest scullion in my kitchen, I will punish her bitterly, bitterly, for that presumption which prompted her to breathe the fatal 'Yes' when she was asked whether she would marry the Prince of Wales."

During the latter portion of these musings, his Royal Highness rose from his seat and paced the room with an excitement which was also evidenced in the loud tone to which his voice rapidly swelled and the earnest gesticulations that he made. Nor could anything exceed the haughty arrogance and the superb complaisance with which he spoke of himself as the first gentleman in Europe.

Having brought his denunciatory tirade to a conclusion, he returned to his seat and continued the perusal of the letter which he still held in his hand. For a few moments he read on with comparative coolness; but suddenly he started and held the document more closely to his eyes, as if

there were a possibility of misconception relative to some particular passage.

But, no; he had read aright, and thus the latter portion of the correspondence ran:

"Your Royal Highness honoured me with a mission of the most secret and sacred character, and I set forth with the determination to perform my duty to the utmost of my power. That resolution remains unaltered. My mission properly divided itself into two objects: the first was to report concerning the personal appearance, accomplishments, and manners of her Serene Highness the Princess Caroline of Brunswick; and the second was to glean as much information as possible respecting her private character, pursuits, etc., and especially as to whether her conduct had in anywise or at any time afforded grounds for scandalous whispering. It is this latter, and by far the least agreeable portion, of my task that I now proceed to accomplish.

"I have not the slightest doubt that her Serene Highness the Princess Caroline possesses every virtue. Her chastity is unquestionable, her propriety of conduct is beyond all question. In fact, the most inveterate scandal-mongers and purveyors of tittle-tattle have never dared to whisper a syllable prejudicial to the reputation of her Highness. But whether it be, or be not, a crime in the eyes of your Royal Highness that the princess has loved, nay, still loves another, is a point which I dare not venture to speculate upon. I am here to tell the truth, charged by your Royal Highness with a mission of secrecy; and it therefore remains for me only to report such particulars as I have succeeded in gleaning.

"Her Serene Highness the princess has undoubtedly formed an attachment for the Baron Bergami. This nobleman belongs to a poor but ancient family; and nothing of all that this family once possessed remains to the baron except the titled name. He is a mere youth, remarkably handsome, and recently filled the post of secretary to the diplomatic agent for the court of Prussia. But the instant it was known that negotiations had been opened between the British Minister and the court of Brunswick relative to the marriage of her Serene Highness to your Royal Highness, the Baron of Bergami suddenly disappeared. It is supposed that he was immediately dispatched to fill some other appointment elsewhere.

" The love of the princess for this youth is full of the most touching romance. They never spoke to each other in their lives. It was in the ducal chapel that the handsome Bergami first attracted the notice of her Highness; and her modest beauty at the same time made a deep impression upon his heart. This happened about eighteen months ago; and ever since (until Bergami quitted the state a few weeks back) was he a constant attendant in the ducal chapel. It would seem that the sentiment of love enables even the most innocent and artless woman to dive quickly and accurately into the depths of that mind which she is interested in probing; nor less can love speak by the eyes, and the language which those eloquent orbs express is universally comprehended without variation of idiom. Thus was it, then, that in due time the princess read the secret of Bergami's soul, while he made a similar discovery with regard to the royal lady herself. Then tender looks were exchanged; and once or twice her Serene Highness dropped a flower from the ducal pew, as if by accident, but which the youthful adorer failed not to pick up and place next to his heart. The proof of homage and devotion which he gave in return consisted of odes and lyrics, sent anonymously to the principal lady-in-waiting upon her Highness; and this said lady-in-waiting fancied that they were addressed by some love-sick swain to herself. In the fulness of her vanity, she invariably showed them to the princess, who failed not to comprehend from whom they came and for whose special perusal they were intended. Couched in terms the most respectful and in verse the most fluent and harmonious, these lyrics breathed as fervid a soul of love as that which Petrarch poured forth in immortal sonnets to the charming and worshipped Laura.

" And to those innocent exchanges of love's testimonials was the correspondence of her Serene Highness and Bergami limited. They never spoke to each other, save by the eyes; they never were near enough to each other to exchange a whispered vow or the slightest touch of hands. But in her artlessness, the princess confessed to two or three lady friends this singularly romantic passion which she experienced and had inspired, and those ladies whispered the tale to their friends. It eventually reached the ears of her Highness's august parents; and although they attached but little importance, and indeed scarcely any credence, to the

matter, it was nevertheless deemed only proper and prudent to obtain from the Prussian court an order for the removal of Bergami to another state.

"Such are the facts of this singular love-passage in the life of her Serene Highness; and my informant assures me that her Highness cherishes with a species of religious fervour the image of the handsome youth in her bosom. That I can fully rely upon my informant as an authority in this matter, your Royal Highness may judge from the fact that the said informant is one of the lady friends enjoying the confidence of the princess; and that having become my mistress, she freely and cheerfully unbosoms all her secrets to my ear."

Such was the concluding passage in the important document which his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales had that day received from his emissary in Germany. There was nothing in the romantic tale which it contained to furnish him with a pretext for breaking off the contemplated match with the Princess Caroline; in fact, the whole thing was so childish that its truth could scarcely be admitted by serious-minded persons, when it came to be considered that her Serene Highness was not a girl of fifteen or sixteen, but a woman of twenty-five. Moreover, the Prince of Wales said to himself, "If I don't marry this German creature, my blessed parents and their equally agreeable Minister will only be looking out for another of the same breed; and I may go farther and fare worse."

Having thus philosophically made up his mind to let the matrimonial affair take its course, the prince was on the point of throwing the letter into the fire, when it suddenly flashed to his brain that it might prove useful in some way or another.

"Who knows what purpose it may serve?" he muttered to himself.

And as he proceeded to secure the document in his desk the operation reminded him of how his most valuable and important papers had been abstracted by the Amazon, and how they were still retained in her possession until the conditions which she had imposed upon his Royal Highness were fulfilled.

"I will be revenged upon that woman, by Heaven!" he exclaimed, aloud, and he dashed his clenched fist upon the lid of the desk. "Once let me be out of her power, and we

shall see who is the more powerful, the heir apparent to the British throne, or Jack Rann's blowen converted into Lady Lade."

Scarcely had the prince made this reflection when Germain entered the room with a letter, which he handed to his royal master. He then retreated to the vicinage of the door, where he stood to await the reply that was desired.

The heir apparent instantaneously recognized the fluent writing of Mrs. Fitzherbert; and with a trembling hand he opened the missive, the contents of which ran as follows:

"Circumstances of the most distressing and humiliating character could alone induce me to ask you for assistance. I do not appeal to you as a wife to a husband, although I have the right to do so; I do not appeal to you as a friend to a friend, because all kindly feeling on your part toward me is extinct; and I do not appeal to you as a mistress to her lover, because I never looked upon myself in any less honourable light than that of your spouse. No, in none of those capacities do I appeal to you, although it was originally my intention to put both love and friendship to a last test. But I request you, on the score of past reminiscences and all that has ever taken place between us, to see the bearer of this letter and satisfy him in such a manner that I may be released forthwith from my present cruel embarrassment."

The note was without date or signature; but the beautiful handwriting would have been unmistakable, even if the tender pathos of the language had touched no responsive chord in the heart of the Prince of Wales. He knew, then, that the missive was from Mrs. Fitzherbert; but he was altogether ignorant of the calamities which had befallen her, and it was as much through curiosity to be enlightened in this respect as from any feeling of a more praiseworthy nature that he bade Germain introduce to his presence the bearer of the letter.

The valet bowed and retired, and in a few minutes Mr. Nathan Crimp was ushered into the royal voluptuary's private apartment.

But the sheriff's officer's external appearance had undergone as signal a change as copious ablutions, clean linen, the Sunday apparel, and a fine display of jewelry could possibly accomplish with regard to it. In fact, Mr. Crimp had made himself as smart as possible; and although it would have been

well if he had looked a trifle less greasy about the hair and face, and likewise if he had removed the black cornices from his nails, or, at all events, worn gloves, there nevertheless certainly was a great improvement in the personal appearance of Mr. Nathan Crimp.

Germain retired as soon as he had introduced this individual; and the prince, having scanned him with a hasty but searching glance, demanded, in a somewhat imperious tone, "Where is Mrs. Fitzherbert, and who the devil are you?"

"Please your Royal Highness," returned Mr. Crimp, with a low bow and a scrape of the left foot, "the lady's in lavender, and I'm the you know what, savin' your Royal Highness's presence."

"Damn the presence!" cried the prince, impatiently. "What do you mean me to understand, man? Is Mrs. Fitzherbert in a lockup house, and are you a bailiff?"

"Please your Royal Highness, the lady's safe in my lockup, as you have just observed; but I ain't a hordinary bum-bailey, I'm the officer hisself."

"Ah! now I comprehend," said the prince, throwing himself back into the armchair whence he had risen. Then, taking a toothpick, he crossed one leg over another in a leisurely manner, and seemed to reflect for nearly a minute. "Well, and how much is she locked up for?" he at length demanded, in a tone which now appeared to be expressive of very great indifference indeed.

"Two thousand and odd guineas, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Crimp.

"Zounds!" ejaculated the prince, tossing the toothpick into the fire. "And what does she want me to do?"

"Pay it, I suppose," was Mr. Nathan Crimp's very natural though somewhat blunt explanation.

"May I be damned — I mean may I be hanged," exclaimed his Royal Highness, correcting himself, "if I can do anything of the kind. Come now, Mr. What's-your-name — "

"Crimp, Nathan Crimp, at your Royal Highness's service," interjected the bailiff, with another low bow.

"Well, Mr. Crimp, then," continued the prince, in a tone of half-superciliousness and half-command, "I know that all gentlemen of your fraternity are not only rich as Crœsus, but

likewise ever ready to advance your coin at good interest. You will therefore take my note of hand for the lady's debt, with the addition of a suitable bonus for yourself."

"Your Royal Highness's note of hand!" exclaimed Crimp, with a sort of dismay at the proposal. "Why, bless your dear heart! it isn't negotiable — I couldn't do nothink with it; and besides, I'm young in the business as a hofficer and haven't so much money to lend."

"What can be done, then?" asked the prince, carelessly. "For my part, I cannot spare two thousand guineas just at this moment; and if my note of hand will not do, why, then —"

"The lady must go to the Fleet, that's the long and short on it," added Mr. Crimp. "But I hope your Royal Highness will make a heffort, for I can assure you she's in a woful plight. All her servants has run away, her friends won't do nothink for her, she's got little or no money left, and since she was arrested, a execution for a small debt has been put into her house in Piccadilly, so that her wery wardrobe is now under restraint, as the sayin' is."

"Well, I am very sorry for it," said the prince, in a tone of unfeeling abruptness. "But I can do nothing more in the matter than I have suggested; and therefore it is useless for you to remain here any longer."

"But what answer am I to take back to the poor lady?" demanded the sheriff's officer.

"Go and tell her that I am so poor I cannot possibly assist her, and so indisposed that I cannot pay her a visit," replied the prince, and he waved his hand toward the door in a fashion too significant not to be comprehended by Mr. Crimp. "But stay!" suddenly ejaculated his Royal Highness, starting from his seat; "you had better depart by a private staircase which there is at hand, or else my people in the hall will only be stopping you to ask impertinent questions; for I dare say that some of them would not fail to guess what your calling is. Come, my good fellow, be off, and here's a guinea for you."

Thus speaking, the heir apparent drew aside a velvet curtain at the extremity of the apartment, unlocked the door which was now revealed, and motioned impatiently for Mr. Crimp to take himself off by the secret staircase. The bailiff, whose right hand clutched the guinea which had

been thrust into it, descended half a dozen steps at a time in his haste to comply with the royal pleasure, which evidently was that he should lose not a moment in vanishing from the perfumed precincts of Carlton House; and with such precipitation did he bundle himself down the staircase, that he had not time to check his pace when the sounds of ascending footsteps suddenly reached his ears. The consequence was that at the next moment he came in violent collision with the individual who was thus beginning to mount the staircase; and before the unfortunate bailiff had time to murmur a single syllable of apology, he received a couple of smart lashes from a riding-whip.

"Stupid animal!" cried a voice that was certainly too melodious and flutelike for that of a man, and yet it came from the lips of one wearing a masculine apparel. "Could you not see whither you were going?"

The staircase was only dimly lighted by means of a small fan-window over the private door at the bottom; but Mr. Crimp was nevertheless enabled, by a second glance at the personage whom he had thus encountered, to perceive that it was a splendid woman in the attire of a man; for the magnificent black hair showered in a thousand ringlets over the broad but sloping shoulders, and the tight-fitting frock coat developed the luxuriant contours of the superb bust.

"Beg pardon, sir, — ma'am, — but your whip cuts sharp," said Mr. Nathan Crimp. "I didn't mean no offence by running agin you."

"Well, then, my good fellow, we will say no more upon the subject," exclaimed the disguised lady, her merry smile revealing the brilliant teeth which appeared like the whitest and purest ivory set between the reddest and moistest coral. "But what on earth are you doing here? And who are you? For if you will pardon my rudeness," added the Amazon, still laughing, "you seem to me more like a bailiff or writ-server than a prince's lackey."

"Well, ma'am, — sir, I mean, — that is to say, ma'am," stammered Crimp, utterly bewildered as to the proper terms in which he ought to address the superb creature whose feminine charms were too grandly imposing to be concealed by the masculine apparel which nevertheless became her so admirably, "you ain't wery far wrong in your conjecture — "

"What, then, you are an officer?" said Lady Lade, for she indeed it was; and, inspired by one of those sudden and incomprehensible sentiments of curiosity which often prompt even the most indifferent to inquire into the affairs of others, she raised her finger to her bright red lip, whispering in an undertone, "Hush, speak low, or we may be overheard! And now tell me, my good fellow, what has brought you hither?" she demanded, at the same time slipping a couple of guineas into the bailiff's hand.

"Fust tell me, please, how I'm to address you, — sir, or ma'am?" asked Mr. Crimp, who felt remarkably anxious to be enlightened on that head.

"I am Lady Lade," was the response delivered with a good-humoured smile; "and now you know to which sex I really do belong."

"Ah! ma'am, there wasn't no difficulty in telling that, when once I'd leisure to take one good look at your ladyship," said Mr. Crimp, his mouth watering as he fixed his eyes eagerly upon the superb bosom which seemed ready to burst through the coat that imprisoned it. "But in the fust place I certainly did think you was a genelman, for that whip of your'n hit precious hard."

"And I have given you the salve for the wound, my man," said the huntress, with a smile, as she glanced down at the gold which Mr. Nathan Crimp still held in his hand.

"Just so," he observed, now consigning the coin to his pocket; "and I wouldn't mind receiving as many lashes as your ladyship likes, at the same price. But you was a-asking me what I'm doing here; and I don't care if I tell your ladyship the truth. Perhaps your ladyship knows Mrs. Fitzherbert?"

"By name and by sight, as a matter of course," responded the Amazon, but not to speak to. What of her?"

"She's in a little trouble — or rather a great deal of trouble," continued Mr. Nathan Crimp; "and she sent me with a letter to ask the prince to assist her. But he says he's too poor to advance any money, and too ill to go and see her."

"Where is she then?" inquired Lady Letitia.

"At my lockup in Chancery Lane," was the answer. "But she must go to the Fleet to-morrow unless she pays

to-day, as Rigden the lawyer will rule the sheriff to make a return."

"I know nothing of all those forms and ceremonies," said the Amazon; "but this I do know — that it is scandalous beyond all conception and infamous beyond all description for the prince to treat the unfortunate lady in such a manner. How much does she owe?"

"Somethink more than a couple of thousand guineas would put her all to rights, may it please your ladyship," replied Crimp. "But I'm sure if such a nice, humane, good-hearted creatur' as your ladyship evidently is would on'y come and call upon poor Mrs. Fitzherbert, she would feel herself so much obleeged —"

"Yes, I will accompany you to Chancery Lane at once," exclaimed the Amazon, after a few moments' profound meditation. "The business that has brought me hither upon the present occasion is not so very urgent for a few hours," she added, in a musing tone to herself; "besides, it is probable that if I take Mrs. Fitzherbert's affair in hand for her I shall have to speak to the prince on that also. I may therefore as well kill two birds with one stone."

Thus musing, the beautiful huntress turned and led the way from the secret staircase, Mr. Nathan Crimp closely following her. Emerging from the private door, they hastened into Pall Mall, where they entered a hackney-coach, which bore them to the dark and musty-looking precincts of Chancery Lane.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SPONGING-HOUSE

It was five o'clock in the evening, and as a thick fog was coming rapidly over the City, the candles were already lighted in the apartment occupied by Mrs. Fitzherbert in Mr. Nathan Crimp's lockup house.

This apartment was shabbily furnished and had a grimy appearance. Wherever the captive lady might happen to lay her hand — whether on the table, the sideboard, the mantel, or the window-ledge — a dingy shade would be taken up, as it were, upon the snowy fingers. A good fire blazed in the grate, and yet the room wore a general air of discomfort that struck upon the mind like a sensation, and pierced with a chilling effect to the very marrow of the bones. Having been accustomed to sleep upon down, tread upon velvet, eat off massive gold plate, and revel in all the luxuries and elegance of life, Mrs. Fitzherbert experienced her present position in all the keenest sense of its bitterness.

Dull and dusty curtains were drawn over the windows, — those windows which were protected with bars strong enough to resist the rapid impetuosity wherewith a lion might bound against them. Useless precaution so far as the present inmate of that room was concerned. Her delicate fingers would have shrunk from even touching the rusty surface of the bars. Besides, the apartment was on the first story, — fifteen feet above the level of the street on which it looked, — and therefore affording in its own elevated position a pretty tolerable guarantee against a daring leap, even if there were no iron bars to protect the windows at all.

The furniture in the room was old and worm-eaten; the

walls were stained with grease, and the ceiling was blackened with smoke.

On the side facing the windows, a door communicated with a sleeping-apartment; and in this chamber there were two beds, — the accommodation being intended for a lady and her maid. But in the present instance the occupant of the best suite of rooms in Mr. Nathan Crimp's sponging-house possessed no dependent of any description either to wait upon or to solace her.

And this lady — the once elegant, brilliant, and courted Mrs. Fitzherbert — was now seated in the comfortless parlour of the lockup house, plunged in the most sorrowful reflections. But every time she heard a footstep upon the stairs, she started, stretched forth her head, and listened. Two hours had now elapsed since Nathan Crimp had set forth on her errand to Carlton House; and surely her fate must be already decided in one way or another? Was she to be released that evening, or was she to repair to the Fleet prison next day? These were the alternatives; and, for aught that the unhappy lady could see or anticipate to the contrary, the result now depended entirely on the man who was her husband in the sight of Heaven.

It was a little past five o'clock when she was aroused for the twentieth time from her reverie by the sounds of footsteps on the staircase; and on the present occasion those sounds did not pass by the door communicating with the landing. No, they stopped at the threshold of her apartment, the door was thrown open, and Mr. Nathan Crimp announced in a loud voice, "Lady Letitia Lade."

As when a sunbeam penetrating amidst an arbour of roses suddenly flings a ruddy glow upon the marble basin of a fountain, so did a flush instantaneously appear upon the pale complexion of the captive lady. For the name just announced was indeed full well known to Mrs. Fitzherbert. The antecedents of Lady Lade, her wretched origin in Lukner's Lane, St. Giles, her connection with "Sixteen-String Jack," her marriage with the old baronet, her dissolute life — and the rumour that she had even been very intimate with the prince himself, — all these matters were perfectly familiar to the fallen lady of quality.

The Amazon instantaneously perceived the glow of mingled indignation and surprise which spread over Mrs.

Fitzherbert's countenance. Nor was she unprepared for some such exhibition of feeling; but taking off her hat she said in her kindest tones, "I come, madam, to sympathize with you, and perhaps to extricate you from your embarrassments."

"And you ought to be wery grateful, ma'am, to her ladyship for thus stepping for'ard," exclaimed Crimp, "at a moment when all your friends is keeping back'ard. But I'll leave you together for a time, ladies, and you can chat over the whole business."

Having thus spoken, Mr. Crimp closed the door and hurried down-stairs, leaving the elegant Mrs. Fitzherbert and the hilarious Amazon alone together.

And strange was the contrast presented by those two women, — strange also in how many points they resembled each other. Mrs. Fitzherbert's radiant head was adorned with a natural crown of golden flaxiness which shone like concrete and circling sunbeams; the Amazon's hair was black as night, and yet shining with so rich a gloss that it seemed as if a glory encircled her head. The eyes of the captive lady were blue, those of the huntress black; but in the depths of each might be read the tale of strong passions, a warm temperament, and a yielding to temptation whenever the pleasure was really coveted and desired. The bust of Mrs. Fitzherbert was grandly beautiful, that of Lady Lade superbly luxuriant; the figure of each was admirably symmetrical and rounded in the richest contours, so that each splendid form seemed glowing to be pressed in the arms of a lover. But the huntress was taller than Mrs. Fitzherbert; and yet the more majestic dignity of the latter prevented this discrepancy from being noticed.

As to the disposition and real character of these two ladies, the resemblance was much nearer than the Amazon suspected, or than Mrs. Fitzherbert herself would have been overwell pleased to acknowledge. For both were accustomed to obey the dictates of their passions without much regard to morality or virtue; both had overstepped the bounds of modesty at a very early age; both, in fact, had paid their adoration to the Goddess of Pleasure. The difference, then, between them lay only in the circumstance that Mrs. Fitzherbert had veiled her intrigues as closely as possible and had even sustained a reputation for purity of

conduct, save and except so far as her connection with the prince was concerned; whereas the Amazon had never troubled herself about the concealment of any one amour in which she engaged, and, although she did not actually make a boast of her dissolute morals, she only smiled or perhaps laughed outright when taxed with her numerous frailties.

Now when the huntress gazed upon Mrs. Fitzherbert, she said within herself, "You blush to receive a visit from me; and yet I am well acquainted with the fact that you were once the mistress of the Marquis de Bellois." But it never struck Lady Lade at the moment that the handsome French nobleman might not have been the only lover whom the stately and prudish Mrs. Fitzherbert had received to her arms, that, indeed, she had rendered many and many an aspirant for her favours superlatively happy, and that perhaps her connections in this manner had not been so very much less numerous nor less miscellaneous than those of Letitia herself. Only, as we have before said, the one had the grand art of covering her errors with an impenetrable veil, whereas the other had pursued her wanton career as freely and as fearlessly as she was wont to dash along a high-road on the back of some spirited charger.

Such were the two ladies that now found themselves alone together. Mrs. Fitzherbert caught eagerly at the hope held out in the few prefatory words which Letitia had hastened to address to her; namely, "I come, madam, to sympathize with you, and perhaps to extricate you from your embarrassments." The aristocratic lady accordingly smothered in an instant the feeling of annoyance which had at first betrayed itself in the flush that crimsoned her countenance; and, requesting the Amazon to be seated, she said, "I presume that the bailiff has left you to explain to me the result of his mission to Carlton House?"

"Such is the fact, madam," replied Lady Letitia. "And to tell you the truth — "

"Ah! I see that you hesitate — you have disagreeable intelligence to impart," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert. "The prince would not see my messenger, or he returned a cold reply, or — Oh, keep me not in suspense, I implore you!"

"Were the result of the man's errand at all satisfactory, I should be overwhelmed with haste to communicate it,"

said the Amazon; "or he himself would have been too eager to do so, and in that case my presence here would have been rendered unnecessary. But inasmuch as you have no hope in that quarter where you had a right to expect everything —"

"Oh, is it possible that he could treat me thus heartlessly?" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, clasping her hands in anguish. Then, almost immediately subduing her emotions and assuming an air of dignity, she said, "But I will not permit the conduct of such a man to break my spirit altogether. You see that I am calm and collected now; tell me, Lady Lade, how he acted toward the good-hearted and well-meaning individual whom I despatched to him."

"His Royal Highness, madam," responded the huntress, in a measured and emphatic tone, "declares that he is too poor to assist you and too indisposed to come and see you."

"He said that, did he?" murmured Mrs. Fitzherbert, endeavouring to retain her composure, but in reality experiencing a cold shiver throughout her frame. "And how happened it, madam, that I have been fortunate enough to deserve your sympathy? And in what manner may I reckon upon your aid?"

"The step which I have taken was adopted on the spur of the moment," answered the huntress. "You have no doubt heard of me before; and perhaps all that you have thus heard is that I am a harum-scarum, good-for-nothing, wild, eccentric, and gay woman? Well, these attributes are perhaps correct enough; but I may observe, without the imputation of vanity, that I possess a heart. Now, the fact is, I some time ago became instrumental in procuring for his Royal Highness a loan from a French refugee, called the Marquis de St. Croix. This nobleman now requires the repayment of his money. He has applied to the prince, who takes not the least notice of his letters. The result is that the marquis comes to me and demands my intervention, and I promise that I will obtain the reimbursement of funds lent upon my representation and through my agency Accordingly, I proceed this afternoon to Carlton House, I accidentally run against an individual in a manner which throws us into conversation together, this individual proves to be Mr. Nathan Crimp, and from his lips I glean the story of your misfortunes and the failure of his mission to the

prince. Then this heart of mine moves within me; I feel indignant at the outrage put upon one of my sex, I long to sympathize with you, and although I had heard that you were proud, haughty, and overbearing, I thought of you only as an oppressed, persecuted, and neglected woman, — and therefore I came hither."

"Believe me, I thank you — thank you most sincerely," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, profoundly touched by the ingenuous and open-hearted manner of the huntress.

"And I will tell you another reason wherefore I was instantaneously impelled by the thought of succouring you to the utmost of my power," continued the Amazon; "and that is because you have been made to suffer much by one who unfortunately served the prince too faithfully."

"Ah, I begin to comprehend you," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, now suddenly recollecting that rumour had described the Amazon to be the mistress of Tim Meagles. "But is it possible that you are acquainted — "

"With all — with everything!" responded Lady Lade, in a low but significant tone. "I am aware that you are the prince's wedded wife, aware also of the means that were adopted to drive you from Carlton House, aware of the existence of those letters which contain the secret that was held in terror over you."

"Then you are acquainted with enough to make me blush in your presence," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, now acting in perfect accordance with the affected prudery which had become habitual to her; and, covering her face with her hands, she appeared to be overwhelmed with shame and confusion.

"Do not annoy yourself, madam," observed the huntress. "I am not quite an angel of purity myself, and perhaps a little farther removed from such an immaculate state of being than you are. Indeed, that same Mr. Meagles to whom I just now alluded as one who had served his Royal Highness too faithfully had for some time been on intimate terms with me; until the base ingratitude and treachery of the prince — pardon me for speaking in these harsh terms of his Royal Highness — caused the expatriation of Meagles — "

"And the papers — what became of the papers?"

demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, hastily, and speaking in a tone hoarse and breathless with suspense.

"They fell into the hands of the prince," replied the Amazon.

"O God! then he knows all," exclaimed the unhappy lady, once again clasping her hands in the anguish of despair.

"Think you, madam," returned the Amazon, "that his Royal Highness would leave you in your present embarrassment, if it were not to avenge himself upon you for that one important passage in your life which those letters reveal? But what will you say when I inform you that these papers are at the present moment in my possession?"

"Oh, you will give them up to me — you will permit me to destroy those evidences of an amour which has proved so fatal to me?" cried Mrs. Fitzherbert. "Tell me, dear friend, tell me that you will give me those letters — "

"I dare not, lady, I dare not," interrupted Letitia. "But I may perhaps make use of other documents which are likewise in my possession to terrify the prince, and wring from him the amount of money you require. On this subject we will discourse presently; but first of all, I must explain to you that inasmuch as Meagles did you a great and serious injury, and as he has since experienced the ingratitude with which the prince pays those who serve him too faithfully, I know that the mind of my ill-used friend must have undergone such a change as would lead him to make all possible atonement toward those whom he has been the instrument of oppressing and wronging on the behalf of his Royal Highness. Therefore, with this conviction, am I now acting as Meagles himself would act were he in London at the present moment."

"Again, my dear Letitia," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, assuming her most coaxing tone and wheedling manner, "again do I thank you for all the generous sympathy you are displaying toward me. But, oh, you would bind me everlastingly toward you if you were to give me up, or destroy in my presence, those fatal letters."

"My dear madam, I dare not," was the emphatic reply given by the huntress. "Mr. Meagles will be in England shortly, and then those papers must either be returned to the prince himself, or placed by me at Meagles's disposal.

Which course I shall pursue will depend upon circumstances. But there is one grand and important use to which I can turn certain other papers, if you will — "

"And those other papers?" ejaculated Mrs. Fitzherbert, inquiringly.

"The proofs of your marriage with the prince!" was the low, solemn, and whispered response.

"Ah! these also are in your possession?" exclaimed the lady, surveying Letitia with as much suspicion and alarm as profound amazement.

"Yes, madam," was the calm response. "I hold in my possession such documents as would shake the very monarchy to its foundation."

"And how — my God! — how can you serve me?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, trembling all over with the nervous excitement of mingled hope, fear, and cruel suspense.

"Listen, madam," resumed the huntress, speaking in a low but impressive tone. "If you say but the word I will proceed to Windsor and seek an interview with the king. It would not be the first time that I have encountered his Majesty with threats in order to wring from him certain concessions," observed the beauteous Amazon, with a smile. "On the former occasion it was to procure favours for the prince, this time it shall be to demand justice for you. Leave the matter in my hands, and if I do not succeed in obtaining for you the title of a duchess with an income of twenty thousand a year — "

"Letitia, you are raving! My dear friend, you are raving!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, wildly excited with new hopes and aspirations. "The king will spurn you from him — "

"The king will grant me all that I require," rejoined the Amazon, with the decisive emphasis and look of one which is confident of success in a proposed undertaking.

"But my union with the prince exists in contravention of the Royal Marriage Act," said Mrs. Fitzherbert; "and the king will defy our threats."

"Not so, madam," returned the huntress, "for I have already well weighed the various details and chances of the whole proceeding. The prince, in espousing you, espoused a Catholic; and therefore he violated the Act of Settlement and forfeits his right, claim, and title to the

British crown. Whether the marriage be good or bad according to the Royal Marriage Act matters not to our purpose. It is a marriage in defiance of the Act of Settlement, and this is the point we have to rest our proceedings upon. Think you, then, that the king will abandon the cause of his eldest son, or that his Majesty will assist him out of this dilemma?"

"It is Heaven that has sent you to me, my beloved friend," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, now throwing her arms about the Amazon's neck and embracing her with as much affection as if they were sisters. "A few weeks — nay, a few days ago — I would not have stirred a step in such a proceeding as the one you have outlined to me, nor would I have permitted a soul to take up my cause in such a manner. But now that I am so completely crushed and overwhelmed by calamities, now that adversities have fallen upon me thickly as hail, and now, too, that his Royal Highness proclaims his utter indifference, if not his open hostility and defiance, I feel that a change has come over me, and that I shall not be wise in suffering myself to be yielded up to martyrdom in order to spare the feelings of others. No, I will adopt the course which you have chalked out, my dear friend; and my eternal gratitude shall be your due."

"To-morrow morning, then," said the Amazon, "I will repair to Windsor Castle and obtain an interview with the king."

"But you will not leave me immediately?" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, taking the hands of the huntress who had risen to depart. "Consider how lonely, how dull, how wretched I must be in this horrible place all by myself," continued the patrician lady, the tears running down her cheeks.

"I will remain with you a few hours; nay, more, until to-morrow morning, if you will," said Letitia; "and we shall thus have ample leisure to discuss and mature the whole plan of proceeding."

"Oh, you will stay with me until the morning," cried Mrs. Fitzherbert, embracing the huntress in the enthusiasm of the most unfeigned delight. "This is indeed kind — most kind on your part! For to pass the night alone in such a place is to stand on the verge of suicide every instant."

"But we will not give way to horrible thoughts, my dear madam," said Lady Letitia. "On the contrary, we will send out for some wine, — then perhaps you will permit me to smoke my cigarette, — and we will chat, laugh, and enjoy ourselves so well that we shall altogether forget we are within the bars of a sponging-house."

"Be it so!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, her countenance brightening up more and more; then, as she drew her chair close to the fire and rang the bell for the servant to procure the wine, she observed, "And when I am a duchess with an income of twenty thousand a year my best and dearest friend shall continue to be Letitia Lade."

CHAPTER XX

A NIGHT IN THE SPONGING-HOUSE

It was about half-past nine o'clock in the evening, and while Mrs. Fitzherbert and the Amazon were discussing their plans up-stairs, Mr. Nathan Crimp and his man Jack were discussing their pipes in the front office on the ground floor.

The fog had cleared away, or rather had turned into a misty rain; and the evening was altogether as unpleasant as it well could be. The bailiff and his man were accordingly adding the creature comfort of a quart pot of egg-flip to the soothing influence of tobacco; and they had just quaffed each the first draught of the agreeable beverage when a noise out in the street attracted their notice.

"By Jove! I will have just one kiss," exclaimed a voice.

"And so will I," cried another. "But how infernally modest she is."

"And yet she showed her ankles pretty well as she walked," said a third.

"Leave me alone — leave me alone," cried the object of these remarks; and then there was a scuffle close outside the door of the sponging-house.

"Come along, Jack," exclaimed Mr. Nathan Crimp. "It's some of them blackguard law students a-kissing a modest gal, I'll be bound."

"Well, let 'em do it," growled the man, who did not see the utility of abandoning his pipe and the egg-flip on any such chivalrous expedition as the one in which his master appeared anxious to engage him. "The law students don't hurt you."

"No, but they sha'n't molest every modest gal as passes this way," exclaimed Nathan. "It ain't proper for me to permit it, being a householder and rate-payer and what not.

So come along, Jack, and I'll stand a second pot of that stuff."

"Ah, that's another thing altogether," observed Jack; and, springing from his seat with extraordinary alacrity, he followed his master out into the street, where four or five young fellows, who in the present day would be signallized as "gents," were laying hold of a young person of apparently ladylike and modest demeanour, and who was vainly struggling to extricate herself from their grasp.

"Now, then, can't ye leave the young o'oman alone?" cried Mr. Nathan Crimp, leaping from the top of his door-steps down upon the nearest of the disturbers of the public peace. Then, dealing a blow to his right and another to his left, and being ably seconded by his man Jack, the valorous bailiff not only rescued the young lady in the twinkling of an eye, but left all her assailants sprawling in the mud.

To conduct the said young lady into the office and bang the door in the faces of the half-drunken sparks who, springing to their legs again, rushed up the steps after the object of their fancy, — all this was the work of a moment; and the bailiff's man very considerately handed the young lady the pewter pot of egg-flip. To Jack's great delight, but somewhat to the surprise of Mr. Crimp, the young lady took a sip of the beverage; then, having returned the vessel to the understrapper, she expressed her thanks for the service so opportunely rendered her. While thus speaking, she drew forth a guinea from her reticule, and, placing it in Mr. Crimp's hand, she added, "You will perhaps send for a hackney-coach to convey me home; and in the meantime I shall feel obliged if you will permit me to warm myself by the fire for a few minutes, for the chill of the evening has penetrated to the very marrow of my bones."

As the young lady thus spoke, Mr. Crimp and his man surveyed her with some attention; and they could not help thinking that the law students had at all events displayed a due appreciation of the beautiful in seeking to refresh themselves with kisses culled from her lips. For beautiful the young lady really was. Her hair, of a rich chestnut, was curled into ringlets, and an elegant gipsy hat set off a very pleasing countenance, with dark eyes, a handsome nose, and pearly teeth. She was above the middle height, her

form was slender, her shape symmetrical, and her deportment characterized by dignified elegance. The dress that she wore was beautiful in all respects, and of handsome materials; and in fine, her whole appearance was that of a well-bred young lady.

That she should be alone in the streets at that hour, and that she should drink egg-flip, certainly astonished Mr. Nathan Crimp to a slight degree; but when he fingered the gold which she placed in his palm, all his thoughts turned in a moment so completely in her favour that he was ready to believe her to be a duchess or a princess if she proclaimed herself as such.

"Fire to warm yourself, miss, or ma'am?" he exclaimed. "By jingo! there ain't a fire a-light in the whole place except down in the kitchen and up in the fust floor where them ladies is," he added, turning toward his man Jack.

"Well, why can't the young lady go up for a few minutes where them ladies is?" demanded the follower. "I dessay they won't objeck to such genteel company. As for poor Mrs. Fitzherbert —"

"Hush, Jack!" exclaimed Mr. Crimp. "What's the use —"

"Did you say Mrs. Fitzherbert?" demanded the young lady, turning abruptly toward the man; then, without even waiting for a reply, she exclaimed, "Good heavens! is it possible that the unfortunate lady has come to this? I had heard that everything was at an end between her and a certain illustrious personage, and I had likewise heard that she was in much pecuniary difficulty; but I could not have conceived that she would have been compelled to exchange her handsome abode in Piccadilly for a comparatively poor lodging in Chancery Lane."

"You see the young lady don't twig the place," observed Jack, half-aside to his master. "This is a lockup, miss, a sponging-house —"

"Mrs. Fitzherbert in a lockup," cried the young lady, overwhelmed with astonishment.

"I'm blowed if our new friend don't know summat about it, though," whispered Crimp to his follower. "See how glib the word 'lockup' fell from her tongue."

"Well, I should like to be introduced into the same room

where Mrs. Fitzherbert is now," resumed the young lady. "I would do all I could to console her — "

"She's got Lady Letitia Lade with her," observed Crimp; "and I dare say they won't objeck to see you for a short time, miss, 'specially when you tells 'em how you've been delivered from rape and ravishment and what not, by me and my man here. So please to walk up to the fust floor, miss, while I send for the hackney-coach — "

"Don't be in a hurry for the hackney-coach just for a minute or two," said the young lady, slipping another gold piece into the hand of Mr. Nathan Crimp. "The truth is, I should like to pass half an hour or so in the company of Mrs. Fitzherbert and Lady Lade. I have heard a great deal about both of them."

"Egad! you may pass the night with 'em, miss, for anythink I care," exclaimed Mr. Crimp. "At all events I won't send for the hackney-coach until you rings the bell up-stairs. And now if you'll foller me, miss. There, that's right, mind your head agin the top of the staircase, — it's rayther low and precious dark, — but here we are safe and sound on the landin'. What name shall I say, if you please, miss?" asked the bailiff, in a low whisper, as he paused at the head of the stairs.

"What name?" repeated the young lady. "Oh, Miss Plantagenet," she added, instantaneously.

"Miss Plantagenet," accordingly exclaimed Mr. Nathan Crimp, as he threw the door wide open; then, stepping into the room and bowing first to Mrs. Fitzherbert and immediately afterward to the Amazon, he said: "Beg pardon, ladies, but I've taken the liberty to introduce a companion to you, and I know you'll be civil to her and all that kind of thing, 'cos she seems to be a wery nice young creetur' and was used scandalous in the street just now by some rollicking sparks as was determined to kiss her. But me and my man — ah! a handy feller is that there Jack when he chooses — made light work on it when we tumbled down upon the snobs and rescued the young lady in a jiffy. So, as she's rayther cold, and as it wouldn't be safe for her to think of leaving while them rascals is a-loiterin' about in front of the door, I've took the liberty of introducing her to you, ladies — "

"There never was such a long story that might have been

summed up in so few words," interrupted the Amazon, but with a good-natured smile. "Miss Plantagenet seeks a warm fire and female companionship, and she can have both here. At least, unless the real owner of the apartment has any objection?" added the huntress, looking inquiringly at Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"Not the slightest, my dear friend," was the immediate response. "How could I, under the circumstances? Pray be seated near the fire, Miss Plantagenet," said the patrician lady, doing the honours of the comfortless room in the lockup with all that elegance and grace which, having been acquired in the gilded saloons of fashion, were now so habitual to her.

"Ah, I knowed it would be all right," muttered Crimp, as he closed the door and withdrew.

Meantime Miss Plantagenet had advanced into the room and acknowledged with a graceful salutation the courteous remarks which had fallen from the lips of Letitia Lade and Mrs. Fitzherbert. The reader may be well-assured that these two ladies scanned, or rather scrutinized, at a glance the external appearance of their new friend; and the result was highly satisfactory. Indeed, they were both immediately prepossessed in her favour; and as she was the heroine of the little adventure in the street which had compelled her to take refuge in Mr. Crimp's sponging-house, she became the object of additional interest on that account.

"Madam," said the young lady, addressing herself to Mrs. Fitzherbert, "I am delighted on the one hand to have the honour of forming your acquaintance; but I am deeply distressed on the other that our first meeting should take place in such a den. May I hope that your embarrassment is only temporary. And may I add, without giving offence, that if the resources which I can command be adequate to the purpose of accomplishing your liberation, I shall experience the greatest happiness in placing my means at your disposal."

"Such kindness from a stranger — a perfect stranger — deserves my sincerest gratitude," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, scarcely knowing what to think of the offer, whether it were a mere idle compliment or a genuine proposal.

"Is it possible that you have some object in coming hither, Miss Plantagenet?" asked the Amazon, who began to

suspect that the visit of the young lady might not be altogether so accidental an occurrence as it at first seemed.

"I can assure you, ladies, that ten minutes ago I had not the slightest notion of being in this house, nor in your company," said Miss Plantagenet, whose voice had that semi-masculine tone which is harmonious as a flute; and as she now spoke with the emphasis of sincerity, it sounded rich with its somewhat deep melody to the ear. "A few words will suffice to give those explanations which the master of the house could not altogether convey when he introduced me, in his own rough but honest style, into your presence. I live at the West End and am entirely my own mistress, although so young. Having passed the evening with some friends in this neighbourhood, I expected my maid to fetch me home; but she did not come, and, in order to avoid giving any trouble at my friends' house, either in sending for a hackney-coach or escorting me to one, I stole away from the party. Close by this door I was insulted by some rude young men, whereupon the master of the house came forth and rescued me. Being very cold and much frightened, he proposed that I should warm myself and at the same time seek the company of two ladies whom he represented as being in the house at the moment, and whom he named. I then felt reassured, for I knew you both by reputation; and I am as happy to form the acquaintance of Lady Lade as that of Mrs. Fitzherbert. So much for the incidents that brought me hither. Now let me ask you whether you will give me credit for sincerity in regard to the proposal I made just now?" and as Miss Plantagenet put this question, she addressed herself to Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"Accident — or shall I say Providence? — has sent me two generous friends," observed the patrician lady, glancing from Miss Plantagenet to the Amazon, and looking her gratitude at both. "But the amount for which I am incarcerated is large, very large, — two thousand guineas and upwards, — and the lawyer who has taken such harsh measures against me is a severe and cruel man — a Mr. Rigden —"

"Rigden!" ejaculated Miss Plantagenet, with a sudden start.

"Yes, do you know him?" inquired Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"A little, quite enough to be well aware that he is all you represent him to be, — cruel and severe," observed Miss

Plantagenet. "But, nevertheless, if you have no other chance of releasing yourself, than by paying the full amount, I will not fly from my promise; and the sum shall be placed at your disposal in the morning."

"My dear young friend," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, taking both the hands of the visitress and pressing them warmly, "I know not how to express my gratitude to you for this unlooked-for — this unmerited — this generous kindness on your part."

"But remember, my dear madam, that it is necessary for you to remain here until the result of my negotiations in a certain quarter shall be ascertained," said Lady Lade, "because it is absolutely requisite to show a certain personage how you have been neglected by another exalted personage — "

"And in case of any disappointment or delay," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, "I can accept the generous proposal of our new friend."

"Precisely so," observed the Amazon. "Let that be the understanding. But with this addition, however, that I may be permitted to furnish my quota of the amount requisite to accomplish your release — provided that our other plan should, as you suggest, either fail or experience delay."

"Again must I declare that Providence has sent me two of the kindest friends that any one placed in such embarrassments as I could possibly have," said Mrs. Fitzherbert. "But it is growing late, and perhaps Miss Plantagenet does not feel overwell pleased at the idea of venturing forth alone once more."

"I will cheerfully accompany her home," exclaimed Lady Letitia; then, with a merry laugh, she added, "And my Amazonian garb will serve to protect us both from insult. Or we can tell Crimp to send for a coach — "

"Were I at my own house," interrupted Mrs. Fitzherbert, with a heavy sigh, "I should ask Miss Plantagenet to favour me with her company until the morrow."

"Oh, do not think that I will desert you, dear lady, because you happen to be placed in this embarrassment," cried Miss Plantagenet, the colour mounting to her cheeks and her eyes flaming up with a strange light. "No, it is precisely because you cannot invite me to repose upon a bed of down

and in an elegantly appointed chamber that I must insist upon remaining with you until I see how far my humble services may be rendered available to your purposes, or to what extent any other plan which you have in view may succeed."

"Lady Lade proposes to pass the night with me," said Mrs. Fitzherbert; "but as she will be compelled to leave me the first thing in the morning, it would give me unfeigned pleasure and be performing an act of pure benevolence if you would stay with me until her return to-morrow night or early on the ensuing day — "

"Nothing will afford me greater pleasure," said Miss Plantagenet, evidently catching at the proposal with eagerness.

"Then we will be a merry party, although our mirth take place in a vile lockup house," exclaimed the Amazon. "Come, I will ring the bell and inform the servant that you and I," she added, turning toward Miss Plantagenet, "intend to keep our friend Mrs. Fitzherbert company."

The domestic was accordingly summoned; and when she received the proposed intimation and had retired, Mrs. Fitzherbert locked the door of the parlour and threw open that of the bedroom, saying, "It is time that we should seek repose, since you, dear Lady Lade, will have to rise early in order to start for Windsor."

The three ladies accordingly passed into the sleeping-room; and as there were but two beds, a little discussion commenced as to how the occupants thereof should be disposed. Mrs. Fitzherbert suggested that she and Lady Lade should sleep together, so as to accommodate Miss Plantagenet with a bed to herself; but Miss Plantagenet vowed and protested that she could not possibly sleep alone in a strange house, and thereupon the discussion was continued between the Amazon and Mrs. Fitzherbert as to which should take Miss Plantagenet as a companion. Each was most anxious to have her; but each was willing to yield up her society to the other. At length it was settled that Mrs. Fitzherbert should share her bed with the young lady; and this point being comfortably settled, the process of undressing commenced.

To the imagination of those who admire female beauty, and who look upon lovely woman as the connecting link

between human nature and angelic perfection, it must be a delicious theme for reflection, — those three charming creatures assembled together, and whiling away in agreeable discourse the time occupied by the night toilet. Miss Plantagenet, it is true, bashfully kept aloof from Mrs. Fitzherbert and the Amazon; but these two ladies remained together to render mutual assistance in the little details of laying aside their apparel, and, even as women, they could not help admiring the glowing charms which they thus revealed to each other's eyes.

At length the process of undressing was terminated, the light was extinguished, and while the Amazon took possession of one couch, Mrs. Fitzherbert proceeded to enter the other, where Miss Plantagenet was already ensconced.

CHAPTER XXI

THE PAUPER INVALID

THE night passed, and misty, damp, and drear was the morning that crept slowly forth from the eastern horizon, like a sluggard who is loath to leave a warm couch. And not only only did the cheerless light steal in betwixt the ill-closed curtains of the bedchamber in the sponging-bouse, but penetrated with even a still more gloomy effect into the infirmary of Whitechapel workhouse.

And taking leave for a short space of the three charming occupants of the best sleeping-apartment in Mr. Crimp's abode, we must concentrate our reader's attention in the hospital-room of that spacious receptacle of pauperism to which we have just alluded.

For although it was in the time of the old Poor Law, which was far more merciful than the present barbarian statute, yet was that particular workhouse full, as was every other workhouse in the kingdom then, and as they ever will continue to be, so long as the social system remains corrupt and rotten to its very core. For when the sons and daughters of toil have worn themselves out in producing all the elegancies, luxuries, and refinements of life for the bloated, pampered, and despotic rich; when the millions have exhausted all the vital powers of fibre, nerve, and sinew, in toiling from dawn to darkness for the indolent, luxurious, and ungrateful few; when labour has achieved its all for the behoof of idleness, and the bee is perishing from the fatigues imposed upon it by the unceasing demands of the drone; when the overtasked wretches of the proletarian race become prematurely old in the service of stern taskmasters; when the hewers of wood cannot cut another fagot, nor the drawers of water raise another bucket; when the once

sturdy labourer in the field is useful no longer, and the once skilful mechanic in the factory can no more compete with younger hands, — then away with them, — away with them to the workhouse, and let them thank their stars that such places should be in existence for their accommodation!

Diabolical system! accursed state of society! For thee, poor working man, the future has no promise. Toil arduously and severely as thou wilt, act honestly and uprightly as thou mayst, conduct thyself peacefully and docilely as thou canst, and yet thou reapest no reward in thine old age! When the fulness of years comes upon thee, and thy hair grows white, and thy limbs are feeble, and thou lackest not only the necessaries but also the comforts of life, — then what is thy destiny? Is it a little cottage, humble, and yet neat and cheerful, with jasmine twining over the portico and roses blooming beneath the lattice, so that thou mayst sit in front of thy porch of an evening and enjoy the blessed sunset and the fragrant breeze, while thy grown-up children stand near, surveying thee with mingled love and veneration, and frolicksome grandchildren climb upon thy knees, play at horse with thy cane, and listen in infantine wonderment to hear thy great silver watch tick, — is all this the scene which constitutes the reward that in thine old age thou reapest for the arduous and honest toils of all the best years of thy life? Gracious God, how fearful is the contrast which the stern truth of the picture presents to our view! For, if we would seek for the worn-out working man in the fulness of his years and his venerable decrepitude; if we would follow the son of toil, from the rural scene where he is useful no longer, or from the factory where his skill is no more availing; if we would follow him to the end of his life's journey and trace his steps when age renders them slow and feeble, until he goes down into the damp solitude of the grave, — then must we seek the old, old man, not in a neat cottage, surrounded by a happy and loving family, but in the streets as a mendicant, in the felon's gaol as a vagabond, or in the workhouse as a pauper.

Such is the state to which the wretched, despised, oppressed race of British proletarians is reduced. But who hath crushed them thus effectually? Who hath enslaved them so infamously? The vain, proud, indolent, and rapacious Aristocracy. And this same Aristocracy it is whose

infatuation is so complete that it believes its own barbarian institution proof against the continuous though silent pressure of truth; this same Aristocracy it is that will take no warning from the signs of the times, but persists in maintaining the industrious millions in a condition of serfdom and wretchedness; this same Aristocracy it is that monopolizes the government, and is so thoroughly incompetent to govern. Nay, more: this very selfsame Aristocracy, in its astounding impudence and inflated presumption, refuses the millions their rights on the plea that they are too ignorant to know how to use them; whereas the real intelligence and the sterling common sense of the country are to be found in the contemned, insulted, and outraged masses. There is as much difference between the aristocratic mind and the working class mind, as there is between the gewgaw frippery and finery of a fashionable milliner's showroom and the stupendous though rugged grandeur of the Alpine mountains.

But to resume the thread of our narrative.

Opening from one extremity of the infirmary in Whitechapel workhouse was a much smaller room, which was used for patients who required to be kept particularly tranquil. On the occasion to which we are now referring, it happened that in "the little infirmary," as it was called, there was only one invalid, and this was a man who had been admitted at his own request, a few days previously, in consequence of some very severe injuries which he had received.

The man of whom we are speaking awoke in the wretched pallet where he lay stretched just as the first glimmering of dawn rendered visible the framework of the window facing that pauper-couch. A sensation of violent thirst immediately began to torture him. He stretched out his arm with a painful effort, to feel if any refreshing beverage had been placed by the bedside, but there was none.

"Neglect, cruel neglect, always neglect; nothing but neglect," he murmured to himself. "I heard the doctor tell the nurse a dozen times to be sure and let me have barley-water to drink, and that she must moreover come in to see how I was at least three or four times in the course of the night. But, no, no! I have awakened at every hour, I have heard the clock strike on every occasion since eight last night, and I am sure that no one has been near me. Ah,

one may die of neglect in this accursed place! No heathenish cruelty can be greater than that with which the poor are treated in this Christian country. Christian country, indeed," spoke the patient, in a louder and more emphatic tone; "the diabolical tyranny which is practised in this land of Bibles and Exeter Hall rantings is enough to make infidels and atheists of us all!"

Then, ceasing to give utterance to his thoughts, — but not ceasing to think profoundly and more bitterly still upon his wrongs, — the invalid remained tranquil for some time, while the dawn advanced slowly but perceptibly, bringing into relief all the cheerless features of that hospital chamber.

At last the tortures of thirst became intolerable; and though at the risk of drawing down upon himself the vengeance of a sottish, surly, unfeeling nurse, the invalid was compelled to raise his voice and implore a drop of drink.

Not the slightest notice was taken of his appeal; but, maddened by the burning sensation which that feverish thirst produced, the invalid continued to call for water. At one moment his demand was made in the language of a suppliant; then it was accompanied by a remonstrance against the unfeeling neglect of which he was the victim; and then it was followed by bitter, bitter complainings against the tyranny of the world's institutions.

"For the love of God! give me drink — give me drink — I implore you! Oh, pray do bring me some water! I am sorry to cause trouble; but this burning thirst distracts me. Ah, wherefore should you treat me with this cruel neglect? I would not behave so to you. Nurse, give me water, I implore you! I would not treat a dog as I am treated, though a man and a Christian. But, oh, better, far better to be one of the king's hounds in this country, than one of the doomed race of working men! Holy God! how is it possible that millions of men can tolerate such an atrocious social system? Give me water, I say, bring me drink, or I will drag myself from this straw mattress, I will yell, howl, and scream, I will raise the whole house — "

"You infernal noisy troublesome pauper," growled the hoarse voice of an elderly woman from the adjoining room; "will you hold your tongue?"

"I am perishing with thirst," moaned the wretched man, in

a stifling tone, for his throat seemed as if it were parched with hot ashes.

"Well, perish and be damned!" exclaimed the woman, who was indeed the night-nurse of the infirmary, as she flung open the door which separated the two rooms and appeared upon the threshold in a flannel gown tied loosely around the waist, and a dirty nightcap with great frills flapping over her face.

The appearance of this female was altogether disgusting in the extreme. Her face was full, round, rubicund, and greasy; her nose was pimpled, her eyes were watery, her teeth large and yellow. Being very fat, and having on no stays, her person resembled an enormous sack filled with bran and tied around the middle with a rope. Her duty was to sit up at night and attend upon the patients; but she usually slept more soundly and snored more loudly than any of them.

"Now, then, you cussed pauper," she cried, after the invalid had once more besought her to give him some drink, "do you suppose I've got nothing to do but to wait on your whims and put up with your nonsense? What do you mean, I should like to know, by lying there grumbling in that way? Now, come, one of you little uns," cried the nurse, turning around and addressing a group of children in the room whence she had emerged, "one of you look sharp and bring this here feller some water out of that jug on the table, for there isn't no barley-water. I hadn't time to make none last night."

"It's a shame to let children come up into the hospital rooms at all," muttered an invalid who lay in the larger apartment.

"What do you mean by saying as how that anything's a shame?" demanded the night-nurse, turning fiercely away from the threshold and advancing straight up to the bed of the poor devil who had let slip the unfortunate observation. "Suppose the beadle comes and knocks at the gate at nine o'clock in the evening, with three or four children at his heels, which he picked up starving and crying in the open street? and suppose that the whole workus is so full that there isn't a atom of room to stow away the newcomers, except up here in the 'firmary? Well, then, if you suppose all this, you'll just suppose the real truth which happened

last night; and now I should like to know where's the shame of putting these young uns up in this place."

The invalid who had volunteered the unfortunate objurgatory remark which evoked this long tirade held his peace, and the woman turned her rheumy eyes upon the children of whom she had been speaking.

The juvenile group consisted of three: one was a boy of about thirteen, another was a boy of eight, and the third was a girl of six years of age. Three veritable skeletons were they, — emaciated to a degree that would have caused the flesh of any humane person to creep upon the bones merely to cast one glance upon these poor children. And as if the scandal to civilization, to Christianity, and to the social system, should be more complete, these living skeletons were clothed in such utter rags and tatters that all the ghastly details of their emaciation were laid bare to the view, so that their ribs might be counted one by one, the deep holes in their necks be scrutinized with anatomical nicety, and the whole framework of their bones be scrutinized as it were through the fleshless skin that covered them.

These three objects of wretchedness had just risen from the mattress where they had slept huddled together; and having put on their rags — that mockery of a clothing — by some undefinable means or another, they were whispering in low and tremulous tones when the night-nurse called the elder boy to her.

In obedience to her commands, he filled an earthenware mug with water, and carried it into the " little infirmary " adjoining. But scarcely had his eyes encountered those of the invalid who lay alone in that room, when an ejaculation of mingled wonderment and delight burst from the boy's lips; and, dropping the mug, he sprang into the man's arms.

" Father, dearest father," were the words that now fell from his tongue.

" My son, my own poor boy," sobbed the invalid, as he strained the wretched object of misery to his breast.

And these ejaculations had reached the ears of the other two children, and, immediately comprehending that their father was found at last, they ran into the adjacent room to receive his caresses; and he wept over them in their turn.

Thus was it that James Melmoth, the working man, had his three children restored to him, — he lying in the pauper-

bed of a workhouse, and they presenting to his appalled view the harrowing spectacle of such unsurpassable misery.

The night-nurse had followed the two younger children into the room; and she therefore became an eye-witness of the affecting scene which thus took place. But the woman was not moved by the sight. She had been too many years in that workhouse and had seen too much of pauperism and its miseries not to have her soul hardened, tanned, toughened, and rendered sympathy proof. She accordingly gazed for a few moments in stolid curiosity upon that family group, thus reunited within the walls of a poorhouse; and then leaving those skeleton children and that invalid father to mingle their tears, their sobs, and their caresses, the woman turned back into the large room of the infirmary to pass her comments upon the incident and brew herself some nice strong coffee.

"Oh, father," sobbed the eldest boy, "what has become of you all this time? Do you know — do you know — "

"That your mother is — " murmured the other lad.

"Dead," whispered the eldest, in a voice that was only just audible.

"Yes, yes, I know it — I know it," exclaimed Melmoth, throwing himself back upon the pillow and pressing his hand to his forehead, as if he could thereby shut out some horrible reminiscence from his brain.

"But how did you know it, dear father? How could you know it?" inquired the eldest lad. "You were not with us then — we have not seen you since until now — "

"And yet I know that my poor wife is dead, that your unfortunate mother perished of want, grief, and wretchedness," interrupted Melmoth, in the deep tone of mingled rage and despair. "But do not ask me how I know it, boy. It was in a dream, — a horrible dream, — a dream such as I would not dream over again, no, not for worlds! My God! when I think that I beheld my poor wife stretched in the narrow coffin, with the moon shining upon her marble countenance — "

"Oh, father, don't go on like that!" exclaimed the eldest boy, sobbing bitterly; for he began to fear lest sorrow had deranged the intellect of his only surviving parent. "I suppose you must have heard of poor mother's death somehow or another?"

"Well, well," said the working man, the convulsions of his countenance showing that he was wrestling with some internal anguish of a fearful nature. "Let us talk no more upon that point. But tell me, James, tell me — the baby —"

"Dead — dead likewise," murmured the lad. "Poor baby!"

"Poor baby!" echoed the other boy; and then he and his little sister began to cry piteously.

"I can scarcely repine if God has taken my innocent babe unto himself," observed Melmoth, in a low and trembling voice. "But tell me how it happened — all about it —"

And lying flat upon his back, he covered his face with his hands.

"You see, father," began the eldest boy, "it was on the door-steps of a rich mansion at the West End that mother sank down and died."

"Could you lead me to the spot, James?" demanded Melmoth, without removing his hands from his face, so that his voice sounded hollow, as if emanating from a cavern.

"Yes, I am sure I could," replied the boy, bursting into tears. "My God! I shall never forget that moment. And then," he continued, amidst many vain attempts to subdue the sobs that broke his voice and nearly suffocated him, "and then the beadle came and took us to the workhouse, and baby was given to an old woman to nurse, in the female paupers' ward. Next morning poor baby was found dead by the woman's side — "

"Poor baby!" murmured Melmoth, who lay stretched out and motionless as a carved statue on a tumular monument.

"The doctor was sent for, but the regular one being absent at the time, another came," proceeded young Melmoth, "and he said something about the child being overlaid. I don't know exactly what it was, although I was present at the time in the room where poor baby's body lay and where the doctor came to look at it. But I am perfectly sure that the old woman to whom baby was entrusted was accused of having gone to bed tipsy. However, the doctor said it had better be hushed up, and he had baby's body taken to his house — to examine it, I think they said; but I never heard any more about it — "

"And was there no funeral for baby?" inquired Melmoth, in a deep low tone.

"Not that I know of," responded the lad. "There was a funeral for mother; and I attended it. Brother and sister were said to be too little to go to it; but they cried very much, poor things! The funeral was a wretched affair, and the undertaker was very savage with me because I fell on my knees by the side of the coffin, and — and — "

"Go on, James, go on," said Melmoth, his voice becoming lower and deeper. "You fell down by the side of your poor mother's coffin — "

"And I prayed God to bless you, father, and to bless my poor brother and sister," continued the lad, his words being scarcely intelligible on account of the agonizing sobs that broke upon his articulation. "I did not pray God to bless poor dear mother's soul and take it unto himself, because I felt assured that she had gone to heaven. Yes, she had suffered too much on earth, and was too good, and too kind to us, not to have gone to heaven."

"You are right, James," said Melmoth; "she has gone to Heaven. And there she will not meet rich people to oppress her; for very, very few kings, queens, lords, and great folks can possibly go to heaven. I know it — I am sure of it! I have had glimpses of heaven as well as of hell, and I have seen that those who are miserable and trampled upon in this world become happy in the next, whereas those who are pampered, luxurious, and despotic on earth are the very ones that people hell hereafter. And if this were not so, where would be the justice of God?"

"Yes, you are right, father — you must be right," said the boy. "I cried much — very much — when poor mother was put into the ground; and I should like to have seen baby buried — I mean that I might have prayed over her — "

"But you tell me that the body was sent to the doctor's house and that you never heard any more of it?" said Melmoth, inquiringly.

"Such was the case, father," returned the lad, still sobbing heavily.

"And do you know where that doctor lived, or what his name was?" demanded Melmoth.

"His name was Thurston, and he lived somewhere at the West End — in May Fair, I think they said," replied the lad.

"Good! I shall not fail to remember it," observed Melmoth, with a deep and ominous concentration of feeling evident in his tone. "And now tell me how you came to leave that workhouse at the West End and find your way into this."

"The master of the workhouse at the West End let us be together until after mother's funeral," continued the lad; "and then he wanted to separate us, — I mean to put me and brother into one ward, and sister into another. But sister cried so dreadfully that I would not let her be taken from me; and as we were obliged either to submit to the rules or leave the place, we chose the last. So we were turned out one morning, each with a piece of bread, and in our rags — "

"My God! my God!" murmured Melmoth, who still kept his face covered with his hands; but the shaking of the bed beneath him showed how terribly his form was convulsed with the workings of his inward emotions.

"And so we had to beg our bread again, as we did when mother was alive," continued the lad; "and a shocking time we had of it. But I need not make you more unhappy than you are, dear father, by describing to you the dreadful hardships we have undergone. You may be sure, oh, you may be sure," exclaimed the boy, with all the enthusiasm of sincerity, while the big tears rolled down his pale sunken cheeks and his voice vibrated with the tremulousness of deep feeling, — "you may be sure that whenever I did get anything, dear little sister was taken care of first, and brother next, and myself last — "

"O God! O God! this is almost more than I can bear," murmured Melmoth, writhing in the pauper-bed as if he were struggling against some invisible fiend sitting upon his breast like a nightmare. "Very terrible is the history of poverty, O Lord! and that tale is the history of millions and millions on the face of the globe. Oh, if thou art really a God of justice, reveal thyself as such and put an end to a state of things which thy goodness would not have engendered of its own free will!"

"Father — dear father — do not reproach the good God to whom my poor mother always taught me to pray," whispered the lad in a tone of gentle but earnest remonstrance.

"I was wrong, my boy, wrong!" said Melmoth. "But there are moments in our lives when we doubt the existence of everything good, because we see that the world is ruled by everything bad. And yet I should not be skeptical, no, not I, of all living men!" added the pauper invalid, his voice suddenly resuming its tone of profound solemnity. "For I have seen heaven in my dreams, ay, and hell too — "

"Father — dear father — do not talk in that way any more!" cried the lad. "But tell me what is the matter with you, how long have you been ill, why you did not seek us out — And, ah! this reminds me that four or five days before poor mother's death, she told us that you had returned to London, — that she was quite sure you had, — for that she had overheard your voice in the room where she slept one night, — a miserable place, in a lodging-house; and the room was quite dark at the time when you came in, and poor mother fainted for joy on recognizing your voice, but when she recovered her senses again, you were gone! And it was while roving about in all directions looking for you, that poor mother fell down on the doorsteps — and died — "

"I remember the incident to which the statement you have just made must refer," said Melmoth. "There was a talk of vampirism in that dark room on the night whereof you speak," added the invalid, a low guttural noise like a ferocious chuckle mingling with his words like an undercurrent of sound, as if a fiend were echoing his words in mockery. "Yes, I remember the occurrence well. But is it possible that you were all sleeping in that room on the particular night in question?"

"Such was the case," replied the lad. "And now pray give me some account of yourself, dear father, and what ails you — "

But at this moment the boy's questions were cut short by the entrance of the surgeon, followed by the regular nurse belonging to the infirmary, and who was a woman somewhat more respectable in appearance though scarcely more agreeable in temper than the repulsive creature who had charge of the place during the night.

"Well, I understand that there is a singular recognition here, eh?" exclaimed the surgeon, who was a person of about five and thirty years of age, offhand in his manner, but by no means harsh nor dictatorial, and as devoted to

his profession as any enthusiastic lover of a particular art or science can possibly be. "Poor children! poor man!" he observed, in a voice through which a tone of sympathy penetrated. "The meeting was a happy one in some respects, doubtless, but in others — Ah! well," he cried, suddenly interrupting himself and shaking his head solemnly, "we must endeavour to bear up against misfortune in this world."

"It is easy, sir, for those to speak thus who have never known what starvation, houselessness, cold, and weary wanderings are," said Melmoth. "But I thank you for the compassion which your looks imply, and also for the attentions which I have received at your hands during the few days I have been here."

"Well, well, I have done the best I could for you, my man," exclaimed the surgeon. "In the course of a week we shall put you upon your legs again, I haven't the slightest doubt."

"Thank God!" whispered the eldest boy to his brother and sister; "in a week father will be well."

"Meantime," continued the surgeon, "we must take care of these young ones for you. Poor things! they are in a dreadful condition — a dreadful condition! I will place them on the sick list, so that they may be up in the infirmary and able to see you as often as you like. Besides, they can have a little broth and port wine and suchlike strengthening things, do you hear, Mrs. Bodkin?"

"Yes, sir, I hear, sir," answered the nurse, with a simper. "I'm sure they do want port wine bad enough, sir, poor things!" she added, as she swept her eyes over the miserable objects huddling near their father's bed; for the woman was always glad when the surgeon ordered wine for the invalids, inasmuch as she invariably appropriated two-thirds of the allowance to her own use.

"Well, then," continued the doctor, "take the children away for the present, send them to the bath, let them have warm clothing, and put them down on the sick list. I'll sign the certificates by and by."

The children accordingly took a temporary leave of their father, and the surgeon was left alone with his patient.

CHAPTER XXII

MISS PLANTAGENET

SCARCELY was it daylight when the occupants of the best bedchamber in Mr. Crimp's sponging-house rose from their couches and commenced their toilet. The Amazon was full of spirits; for she had slept soundly, had dreamed agreeable things concerning Tim Meagles, and was well pleased with the mission which she had volunteered to undertake to Windsor Castle.

But Mrs. Fitzherbert was somewhat silent and pensive; and the huntress soon began to rally her upon what the harum-scarum creature naturally fancied to be lowness of spirits on the part of the captive lady. As for Miss Plantagenet, she only studied now to keep aloof from that part of the chamber where Letitia was performing her toilet; and thus the young lady and Mrs. Fitzherbert remained together, assisting each other in the details of dressing; whereas it was Mrs. Fitzherbert and the Amazon who had thus stuck close by each other on the preceding evening.

"What ails you this morning, my dear friend?" asked Lady Lade, as she began to imprison her fine bust in the corset which was utterly incompetent to add a tittle to the superb elegance of her shape as a woman, but which was necessary to give the proper "fit" to the frock coat which she was presently to assume. "You are quite reserved, melancholy, and silent," she continued, peeping round the curtains at Mrs. Fitzherbert, who was not quite so far advanced as herself in the business of the toilet.

"Pray do not think that I am reserved, my dearest friend," said the captive lady. "Reserve toward you would be ingratitude."

"Oh, I did not mean anything so serious as that," ex-

claimed the Amazon, once more protruding around the curtains that countenance which was so splendidly handsome and so radiant in the natural light of its good-humoured smiles. "But wherefore does Miss Plantagenet avert her head as if I were a gay gallant peeping around at her virgin loveliness?"

"My dear Lady Lade, what are you talking about?" cried Mrs. Fitzherbert, blushing from the very crown of her head down to the bosom. Then, as she hastily began to comb out her long hair of golden flaxiness, she purposely threw it all dishevelled over her shoulders and neck to veil that deep carnation glow which had so suddenly spread beneath her camelia-like skin.

"What am I talking about?" echoed the Amazon, laughing heartily; "surely I have said nothing to shock you, my dear friend? You seem quite confused, and really if I were a young gentleman in female apparel, instead of being a lady in male attire, it would be impossible that you could blush more deeply, or Miss Plantagenet conceal herself with more precipitate affright behind the bed-curtains."

"Confused, my dear Lady Lade, I am sure I cannot be confused — I have nothing to be confused at," faltered Mrs. Fitzherbert, as she continued to comb out her back hair, leaving the myriads of shining ringlets hanging over her countenance like a veil.

"Ah! I hear Miss Plantagenet laughing," cried the Amazon, in the same jocular and good-humoured vein. "Well, I suppose there is some joke which I do not comprehend, or that something has escaped my lips the double purport of which I neither saw nor intended. Have your jests, my dear friends, by all means. I would sooner know that you are making merry, even at my expense, than see you dull, reserved, moping, and miserable."

While thus speaking, the hilarious Amazon put on her frock coat; and, her toilet being completed, she passed into the sitting-room to assure herself that preparations for breakfast were in progress. The survey of the table being so far satisfactory, she rang the bell to inquire for a porter; and, when a functionary of that useful class made his appearance, she despatched him up to the West End to order Master Wasp (whom she had taken into her service

during the absence of Meagles) to bring down her horse to Chancery Lane with the least possible delay.

Having taken this step, the huntress returned into the bedchamber for the purpose of hastening her friends with their toilet, and perceiving that Mrs. Fitzherbert was performing some little service for Miss Plantagenet, Letitia very naturally offered to take the pleasing task on herself, so as to leave Mrs. Fitzherbert free to continue dressing without interruption. But Mrs. Fitzherbert would not think of resigning the agreeable duty of aiding Miss Plantagenet; and Miss Plantagenet shrank so much into the obscurest part of the room, that the huntress really began to fancy the young lady's modesty must be of a very extreme and ultra-delicate nature, inasmuch as it recoiled thus affrightedly from the mere aspect of a male costume, although known to be worn by a female. But the huntress was too much occupied with her projected visit to Windsor to bestow much thought upon Miss Plantagenet's peculiarities or the wondrously close friendship which had sprung up between this young lady and Mrs. Fitzherbert; and, returning into the parlour, Letitia looked out of the barred window and hummed an opera air until her two friends, having finished their toilet at last, came to join her at the breakfast-table.

And now it was a fair and pleasant sight to behold these three charming creatures sitting in agreeable companionship and illumining with their bright looks the dusky and cheerless apartment. The Amazon always had a good appetite, and failed not to eat heartily upon the present occasion; while her laugh, so merry and yet so musical, rang frequently through the room, as she still continued to rally both Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet on the singularity of their manner. For the former was every instant blushing without any apparent reason, and then the latter seemed to be overwhelmed with confusion; now they would exchange looks of glowing rapidity, but deep meaning, and then, again, they would endeavour to appear as if there were nothing at all peculiar either in their manner or their thoughts.

Lady Letitia was puzzled at all this; but still she was occupying herself as much with the mission which she had in hand, as with the eccentricities of her two companions, although she made them the exclusive subjects of her

rattling discourse and hilarious mirth. Nor did she lose time over the breakfast-table; but, having done justice to the meal, she rose from her seat and advanced to the window to see if her equipage had arrived.

It was now nine o'clock; and the morning which had stolen forth in the midst of such unseasonable and even wintry gloom was rapidly expanding into a sunny brightness more congenial to the period of the year. The thick, foggy, and unwholesome atmosphere of the preceding evening, which had made the rooms in Chancery Lane dark at five o'clock, and which had even endeavoured to stifle or delay the dawn of the day whereof we are now writing, had rapidly yielded to a warmer temperature and a clearer air, so that it really appeared at last as if youthful Spring had achieved her triumph over stern and remorseless Winter and was about to commence her placid reign.

For the incidents of our narrative, dating from the very commencement of January, 1795, and extending over a range of more than three months, have now brought us to the season when the trees begin to put forth their verdure and the singing of birds gladdens the rural scenery with untaught and discordant harmony. Or, to be as particular as possible with chronological details, we may observe that the day whose incidents we have begun to describe, alike in the Whitechapel workhouse and the lockup in Chancery Lane, bore the date of April 5th.

And it is because this date was a memorable one in the existence of George, Prince of Wales, and in the history of the British nation, that we have thus particularized it.

The clocks were striking nine, then, and the sun was beginning to shine with a cheerful and even potent lustre, as Lady Lade looked forth from the barred window of the sponging-house parlour, while Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet remained still seated at the breakfast-table.

But scarcely had the Amazon stationed herself at the window, thereby turning her back toward her two friends, when the unmistakable sound of a kiss was wafted, in its billing and half-suppressed softness, to her ear. She hastily turned around; and perceiving that both Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet were covered with confusion at having been thus detected in the furtive token of attachment in which they had just indulged, she burst forth into one of

those merry laughs which displayed the ivory beauty of her teeth and enhanced the glow of animation that was natural to her countenance.

But as this incident was uppermost in her mind, and as she looked at Miss Plantagenet, a thought flashed across her brain with the vividness of lightning. That little incident of the kiss was the spark which suddenly kindled a whole train of latent circumstances into the blaze of a startling suspicion; and by the peculiar expression of mingled wonderment and archness which settled all in a moment upon her handsome countenance, both Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet saw that the secret was at least suspected, if not entirely read.

"Oh, this is the most amusing, the most delicious, the most interesting adventure that ever took place!" exclaimed the Amazon, flinging herself upon a seat and bursting into such a hearty peal of merriment that the tears ran down her cheeks.

"What do you mean? What is it that you allude to?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, starting up, and speaking in a voice of hysterical hastiness, while the deepest scarlet suffused itself over her face and neck, down to the superb bosom which the morning-wrapper more than half-revealed.

"Surely our dear friend has got some strange notion in her head?" observed Miss Plantagenet, also rising from her chair and exerting herself with the tensely straining energy of desperation to surmount the confusion which was overwhelming her.

"Oh, it is delicious — capital — glorious — exquisite!" exclaimed the Amazon, her laugh redoubling its joyousness and her mirth denoting so much good-humour and such a total absence of anything savouring of maliciousness, that Mrs. Fitzherbert began to feel more assured, or, rather, less excruciatingly uncomfortable, and smiles mingled amidst the blushes that covered Miss Plantagenet's countenance.

But in the midst of this curious scene, the door was suddenly opened; and Master Wasp, the young page whom Lady Lade had taken into her service since Meagles's expatriation, appeared upon the threshold.

"Now I will take my departure," cried the Amazon, springing to her feet and subduing her mirth. Then, throwing an arch look upon Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plan-

tagenet, she said, " I have not the slightest doubt you will manage to while away the time during my absence. But fear nothing; I am no tale-bearer — the secret is safe — "

" Please your ladyship," interrupted Wasp, speaking in a tone so unusually serious and gloomy that it instantaneously struck upon the Amazon's mind like a presentiment of evil, " I wish to say a few words to you without delay, and in private," he added, glancing toward Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet.

" You can speak out, Wasp," exclaimed the huntress. " These ladies are friends of mine, and I have no secrets with them; although," she observed, with another rapid look of slyness at the objects of her remark, " they do not always treat me with the same generous confidence."

" But something very, very serious has happened, my lady," said the young page, who seemed to have totally lost his wonted mischievous sharpness of look and manner.

" Then speak out at once, my boy," exclaimed the Amazon, now paying more attention to that altered demeanour on his part.

" Please your ladyship, Sir John Lade — " faltered the lad, with increased embarrassment of manner and deeper gloom of countenance.

" Ah! what of my husband? " demanded the huntress. " Has he come in person to look after me? And is he annoyed that I should have stayed away from home all night? If so, he can soon satisfy himself that my time has been passed in the company of two ladies," she added, her humourous vein suddenly reviving as she cast a rapid glance of sly significancy upon Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet.

" Alas! your ladyship will never see Sir John again. At least — not alive — or in this world," observed Wasp, with a faltering tone.

" Good Heavens! what do you mean? " cried the Amazon, all remembrance of the incident which had ere now so exquisitely tickled her fancy vanishing in a moment. " Has anything happened to Sir John? Is he — "

" Dead, my lady," said Wasp, finishing in solemn voice that sentence which her own excitement had prevented her from completing.

" Dead! " ejaculated the Amazon; " is it possible? "

Then, turning aside, she gave way for upwards of a minute

to the feelings which this announcement suddenly stirred up in her bosom.

Sir John Lade had given her rank and position in society; and he had endowed her with wealth. She had been his pet and darling, his joy and his pride; and the reader has already seen enough to prove that she was entirely her own mistress and had nothing to apprehend on the score of a husband's jealousy or ill-temper. In sooth, she had been allowed to do just as she chose, to keep whatever hours might happen to suit her, to go out and return home unquestioned and unwatched, and to wear her masculine apparel at her own good will and pleasure. But in return for so much indulgence on her husband's part, what had she done? It was true that her bearing toward him invariably appeared affectionate and tender, and that she sometimes devoted a few hours to him when he wished her to assume the attire becoming her sex and accompany him in the carriage or preside at his dinner-table; but, generally speaking, her time had been spent in pursuits apart from the sympathies and duties of a wife. Mad pranks with dissipated young men, gallantries and intrigues, the connection with Meagles, and all the various diversions which sustained her character alike as an Amazon and as one of the most dissolute beauties of the age, — these had been the features of that unbounded licentiousness with which she had repaid her husband's fond indulgence and foolish confidence.

No wonder, then, that tears now trickled slowly down her cheeks as the whole picture of her career presented itself to her memory and passed before her mental vision with dioramic effect; no wonder that she sighed and felt dull as she reflected that the old man who had loved her so tenderly was no more, and that under whatsoever circumstances he had breathed his last, she was not there to receive his parting words nor smooth his dying pillow.

"Tell me, my boy, how this happened," said the Amazon, at length turning toward the youthful page, and speaking in a voice that was indeed much changed from the gay hilarity which had so recently thrilled through the room.

"It was a sudden fright, my lady, caused by something which I have yet to explain," observed Wasp.

"Ah! then unpleasant things have occurred?" exclaimed

the huntress. "But of what nature could they be? Speak, my boy, and keep me not another moment in suspense."

"Late last night, my lady," resumed Wasp, "two men came to the house and declared that they had an authority to search the premises. I instantly recognized one of those persons — "

"Who was he?" demanded the Amazon.

"Germain, the prince's French valet," was the reply.

"Ah! this is indeed important," ejaculated Lady Lade, flinging a glance of mingled interest and trepidation upon Mrs. Fitzherbert, whose countenance suddenly assumed an expression indicative of the presentiment of evil which simultaneously sprang up in her mind.

"Yes, one was Germain, my lady," resumed Wasp, "and the other announced himself to be a messenger from the Home Office."

"Good heavens!" cried Lady Lade; "what could such a visit portend?"

"They said that your ladyship was suspected to have been leagued with certain seditious individuals whom the authorities had already sent out of the country," continued Wasp; "and as the habeas corpus remains suspended, the Home Office had power to enforce search warrants granted by the magistrates in such cases."

"The prince is at the bottom of all this," murmured the Amazon, speaking hastily aside to Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"Perhaps he knows that you are with me, and has conjectured the course which you intended to pursue on my behalf?" observed Mrs. Fitzherbert, from whose cheeks had now fled all the blushes with which the preceding incident of the kiss had suffused them, and whose whole form was quivering with the nervous excitement of mingled suspense and terror. "Oh, he is capable of wreaking upon us the direst revenge — I know he is!" added the unhappy lady shudderingly, as she thus revealed her acquaintance with one of the darkest traits in the character of the prince.

"Let us hear the end of all this," said the Amazon; "and we shall then know what to think. For my part, I am overwhelmed with consuming terrors concerning the safety of my papers. Go on, boy," she cried, turning again toward Wasp.

"Germain and the messenger came last night at about

twelve o'clock," continued the page; "and when Sir John Lade heard the nature of their business, he was seized with a sudden tremor and became speechless. The servants carried him up to bed, the physicians were sent for, but he never spoke again, and in less than an hour — "

"He was a corpse," added the huntress, in a low and mournful voice. "Poor Sir John!" she exclaimed, the accents of compunction vibrating in her tone.

"While that sad scene was taking place in one room," continued Wasp, "the two men were ransacking the furniture and cupboards in all the others."

"And the writing-desk in the safe in my bed-chamber?" demanded the huntress, no longer able to restrain her impatience, and yet putting a question to which she dreaded to receive an answer.

"They found it, my lady," said Wasp; "they opened it —"

"Enough," cried the Amazon; "I wish to hear no more."

"Then your worst fears are confirmed?" whispered Mrs. Fitzherbert, hastily.

"Yes, and I am now powerless to assist you at Windsor," responded Lady Lade, in a low deep tone of concentrated rage; then, with a sinister gloom upon her countenance lately so radiant with smiles, and her fine white teeth closely set, she whispered hissingly. "But I will be revenged, as sure as there is a God in heaven!"

Both Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet gazed upon the Amazon in dismay; for there was something ferociously terrible in her manner, her look, and her gesture as she gave utterance to that dark menace.

And it was at this crisis in the scene that a carriage drove up to the door of the sponging-house, the arrival of which instantaneously attracted the inmates of the room to the barred window.

"Two ladies have alighted," said Mrs. Fitzherbert; "but they entered the house so abruptly that I could not distinguish their faces."

"But whose carriage is it?" demanded the Amazon.

"There are no arms upon the panels," replied Mrs. Fitzherbert; "and yet I should know that livery — Oh, if they be really visitors for me," she exclaimed, suddenly recollecting herself and turning around in affright toward Miss Plantagenet.

And this young lady was about to beat a precipitate retreat into the bedroom adjoining, when the door of the parlour itself was flung open by the obsequious Mr. Crimp, and the Duchess of Devonshire, accompanied by the Countess of Desborough, entered the apartment.

CHAPTER XXIII

FRESH SCENES IN THE SPONGING-HOUSE

MRS. FITZHERBERT was for an instant on the point of shrieking out and becoming overwhelmed with confusion, for she knew that the Duchess of Devonshire was at least certain, even if the Countess of Desborough was not likewise sure, to recognize Miss Plantagenet; but the desperate emergency of the case armed her with a sudden presence of mind the strength of which astonished even herself; and springing forward, as if in the exuberance of a joyous gratitude to welcome her friends, she endeavoured to cover Miss Plantagenet's retreat into the adjacent room.

But the move was too late. For, quick as the glance only can pierce the air, did the Duchess of Devonshire instantaneously recognize Miss Plantagenet's features; and, darting forward, she caught the flying young lady by the arm, exclaiming, "Cousin, what masquerade mummery is this?"

"Hush, for God's sake!" whispered Miss Plantagenet, in a low but rapid tone, and accompanying the words with an imploring look.

At the same moment Mrs. Fitzherbert sprang forward to meet the Countess of Desborough; and that presence of mind on her part, by instantaneously engrossing Eleanor's attention, prevented her from observing the singular little byplay which was taking place between the Duchess of Devonshire and Miss Plantagenet.

Meantime Wasp had withdrawn from the room, and the Amazon was only waiting until she could obtain an opportunity to wish Mrs. Fitzherbert farewell.

"Hush, for God's sake!" were the words which Miss

Plantagenet had whispered in the ears of the Duchess of Devonshire, as we have above stated.

"What mummery is this, I demand?" inquired Georgiana, still preventing the young lady from beating a retreat, but dropping her own voice to that same tone of caution the infection of which she instantaneously caught.

"I will explain it all another time, do not betray me, but let me go ere the countess recognizes me," urged Miss Plantagenet, with accents and looks of fervid entreaty, as she strove to break away from the duchess.

At that moment Eleanor, having exchanged greetings with Mrs. Fitzherbert, cast her eyes upon Miss Plantagenet; and the young lady could not therefore possibly beat the retreat which she was on the point of accomplishing, because such a proceeding would have been a flagrant rudeness and in itself calculated to excite the strangest suspicions.

"Introduce me as Miss Plantagenet," was the hasty whisper which she breathed in the ears of the Duchess of Devonshire, as she perceived Eleanor's eyes fixed upon her.

"My dear countess," said Georgiana, with a smile so good-humouredly arch and a manner so softly frolicsome that it was evident she was enjoying the very good joke which she did not however mean to betray, "my dear countess, permit me to introduce you to my fair cousin, Miss Plantagenet, a young lady of whom you have doubtless never heard before, inasmuch as she has only recently arrived in London —"

"Indeed, I am almost certain that I have had the honour of meeting Miss Plantagenet on some former occasion," observed the Countess of Desborough, fixing her eyes upon the young lady with that expression of uncertainty and inquiry which showed that she was vainly taxing her memory to discover where she had seen those features before

"It is possible that we may have met," said Miss Plantagenet, with her softest voice and most agreeable manner; "for this is not the first time that I have visited London — Indeed," she exclaimed, as if struck by a sudden reminiscence, but really catching at the idea to which she was about to give utterance, because she thought that she perceived the earnestness of Eleanor's looks deepening into suspicion, "indeed, it was at our mutual friend Mrs. Fitzherbert's apartments in Carlton House that we met."

"I do not recollect it," observed the Countess of Desborough, as indeed it would have been very singular if she had. "But it may be as you say, Miss Plantagenet. At all events, I am very certain that we have met before somewhere; for your features — pardon the personality of the remark — are as familiar to me as possible."

"And now, wherever it may be that we met before," said Miss Plantagenet, "on the present occasion we encounter each other under circumstances of a somewhat gloomy nature. Our dear friend here," and she looked toward Mrs. Fitzherbert, "has been the victim of cruel persecution — "

"Let us not touch upon the past, in any way," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert emphatically. Then, having suffered the most excruciating terror throughout the little dialogue which had just taken place between Miss Plantagenet and the Countess of Desborough on their introduction to each other, and anxious to turn the general attention as well as the discourse into other channels, she said, "But I had really forgotten to present you to Lady Lade, who has behaved toward me with the most signal, marked, and sister-like conduct — at a time, too, when all my friends appeared to have forsaken me."

"I was out of town, my dear Mrs. Fitzherbert, when your letter was delivered three or four days ago," said the Duchess of Devonshire, as she bestowed a slight and haughty inclination of the head upon the Amazon.

"And I was down at Stamford Manor until last night," added the Countess of Desborough, with an equally cold and reserved acknowledgment of Lady Lade.

A curl of sovereign contempt appeared for an instant upon the lips of the beautiful huntress, as she observed how unwelcome her presence was and how unpalatable this introduction appeared to be to the two patrician ladies.

"And now, my dear friend," exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire, turning hastily toward Mrs. Fitzherbert, "do let us take you away from this horrid place at once. Eleanor and myself have united the contents of our purses for your use — But pray do get rid of that notorious character, Lady Lade," she added, suddenly interrupting herself and sinking her voice to the lowest possible whisper.

"I was much afflicted to hear of your embarrassments, when I came up to town last evening," said the Countess of

Desborough; "and at daybreak this morning I arose, started off to Devonshire House, and was pleased to find that our friend Georgiana was meditating an immediate visit to you. So we forthwith came together — But what on earth is Lady Lade doing here?" suddenly demanded Eleanor, dropping her voice to a whisper in the same way as the duchess had done a moment before.

"Pray be civil to Lady Lade," hastily murmured Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a tone of earnest entreaty, to the magnificent duchess and the brilliant countess; "she possesses an excellent heart — "

At that instant the door was opened hurriedly, and Wasp rushed in, exclaiming, "The prince is coming. He has just entered the office down-stairs and is asking the bailiff some questions."

"The prince!" shrieked Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a dying voice, as she turned toward Miss Plantagenet.

"I shall not remain to meet his Royal Highness," said the Countess of Desborough, her countenance flushing with a sudden indignation as she thought of the outrage which the prince had sought to perpetrate toward her on the memorable night of the grand ball at Carlton House.

"Then do you take my cousin away with you, Eleanor," said the Duchess of Devonshire, pushing both the Countess and Miss Plantagenet into the bedroom, the door of which Mrs. Fitzherbert had just shown presence of mind enough to open.

And as the door of the bedchamber closed behind the Countess of Desborough and Miss Plantagenet, George, Prince of Wales, entered the sitting-room.

Wasp, the nimble page, shut the door behind him and withdrew down-stairs again; and his Royal Highness, taking off the hat which was slouched over his face, and turning down the fur collar of his cloak which had been drawn up so as to conceal all the lower part of his countenance, threw a rapid glance around to ascertain who were present.

Not deigning to take any notice of the Amazon, and only bowing with stately politeness to Mrs. Fitzherbert, the prince extended his hand to the Duchess of Devonshire, observing in a careless sort of manner, "I did not expect to meet your Grace here."

"But I did expect to have heard that your Royal Highness had been here long ere this," said Georgiana, the natural generosity of her disposition prompting this remonstrance against his unfeeling conduct toward her friend Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"There are circumstances which do not always transpire in particular cases," said the prince, with a cold look at her who was his wife in the sight of Heaven, "but which, if known, would alter the aspect of affairs."

Mrs. Fitzherbert started, grew red with indignation, and was about to speak; but suddenly recollecting that the prince was aware of her amour with the Marquis de Bellois, and with the image of Miss Plantagenet likewise springing up into her mind, she felt herself suddenly grow pale as death, while her limbs became cold as marble and an icy tremor shook her entire form.

"I cannot conceive the existence of any circumstances which could induce your Royal Highness to leave our dear Fitzherbert for even as many hours as she has been days in this horrible place," said the Duchess of Devonshire, bravely and generously following up her first remonstrance by this second reproach.

"Perhaps your dear friend, in whom you are so deeply interested and whose part you take so warmly, will bestow her full confidence upon your Grace," observed his Royal Highness, with a scorching sarcasm in his tone and manner, as he threw another look pregnant with meaning upon the unhappy lady who was the object of his cowardly brutality.

"Ah! have I not loved you enough and made sacrifices enough for you, to induce you to be merciful?" she said, in a tone of deepest pathos and with such an appealing look from her fine blue eyes that, however great her frailties might have been, the anguished earnestness of that remonstrance was enough to have moved a heart of stone.

"As I am here to treat matters in purely a business-like point of view," returned the prince, totally inaccessible to any generous feeling on her behalf, "it would perhaps be as well to avoid any extraneous comment. At all events, any revelations that may be made will have been wilfully provoked, and not idly volunteered; even," he added, with a malicious smile, "should the name of Miss Plantagenet be brought upon the tapis."

The Duchess of Devonshire started and bit her lip; for she now saw that the prince, by some unaccountable means, had become aware of that secret, and she therefore comprehended a portion of the allusions which he had just been making and which poor Mrs. Fitzherbert had understood only too well. As for this unhappy lady herself, she was crushed, overwhelmed, annihilated by the last observation which had fallen from the prince's lips, and which proved that even the mystery of the sponging-house, as we may denominate the Plantagenet affair, was known to him.

Pale as a corpse, her eyes fixed, yet staring wildly, with fire in the brain and ice at the heart, Mrs. Fitzherbert staggered back against the wall. Otherwise she would have sunk down upon the floor.

"Has your Royal Highness any compliments to bestow upon me in my turn?" demanded the Amazon, who had hitherto been leaning against the bars of the window, with folded arms, and paying only a dim and misty kind of attention to all that was going on in her presence, — her thoughts being chiefly occupied with the intelligence of her husband's death and the feelings the event had excited in her bosom.

"I presume you are aware of what has occurred at your own abode?" said the prince, turning in a half-disdainful, half-indifferent manner toward her, as if he had his doubts whether he ought to notice her at all.

"I am aware that a couple of ruffians sent by your Royal Highness not only frightened an old man to death by their brutality," said the Amazon, with dauntless tone and manner, "but likewise ravaged the whole house for the object of their predatory visit."

"The persons whom your slanderous tongue libels as ruffians were armed with legal authority," observed the prince, with the haughty confidence and triumphant arrogance of a man who feels that he has got the best of his enemies. "They performed the duty that was assigned to them, and they retook possession of certain documents which had been scandalously and infamously plundered from me. Those documents, Lady Lade," added his Royal Highness, with mingled bitterness and ferocious joy, "are placed beyond your reach for ever. Neither stratagem nor violence can obtain them from me. Beware, then, how you attempt either! As for the death of your husband, I do

not think that you have been so exemplary a wife as to give proof of any wondrous amount of affection for the old man."

"I am well aware that your Royal Highness is totally indifferent to a human life or two, more or less," remarked the Amazon, her red lip curling in withering scorn. The suicide of Foster the merchant, for example."

"Shall we blurt forth in alternate volleys all we know of each other?" asked the prince, who for a moment had started, turned pale, and bitten his lip as that tremendous allusion was hurled at his head. "But perhaps you have no wish that I should proceed to rake in the mire and filth of Lukner's Lane, in order to discover the origin of a certain Letitia Fluke?"

"Your Royal Highness has nevertheless made that same person the companion of your mirthful hours within the gilded walls of Carlton House," retorted the Amazon, in a tone of cool contempt and without the slightest indication of annoyance.

"Yes, because I was anxious to hear her recite some of the amusing rascalities of one of her earliest paramours, the celebrated Jack Rann who was executed at Tyburn," observed the prince, nettled at the placid indifference with which the Amazon received his taunts.

"Your Royal Highness has profited well by such teachings," rejoined Lady Lade, still unmoved and slightly contemptuous; "for the very debates in the House of Commons upon your Royal Highness's debts afford ample proof that the rascalities for which Jack Rann was hanged were mere trifles to the rascalities which your Royal Highness perpetrates with impunity."

"By the living God! this to the heir apparent to the throne?" exclaimed the prince, becoming purple for a moment and then turning white as a sheet.

"Yes, and a great deal more, too," cried the dauntless Amazon, "if your Royal Highness be agreeable to continue this warfare of taunt and repartee."

"I have already forgotten myself enough," said the prince, now recovering his wonted dignity. "Hark you, Lady Lade: we may as well come to an understanding together, as we now fight upon more equal grounds than when last we met."

"Do not think that because you have gained possession of

the papers I am completely in your power," observed the huntress. "Remember that the secrets contained in those documents are treasured up here," and she tapped her forehead significantly with the handle of her riding-whip.

"The secrets, without the documentary proofs to back them," said the prince, "would be looked upon as mere scandal and idle tittle-tattle. Nevertheless, I do not wish to provoke your animosity farther than it may be already excited; and therefore let there be at least a cessation of hostilities between us. I have got back my papers: in two or three weeks you will have back your Meagles, and let that suffice you."

"I accept the armistice," exclaimed the Amazon, after a few moments' reflection; then advancing toward Mrs. Fitzherbert, who was now conversing in a low tone with the Duchess of Devonshire, she said, "Madam, I bid you farewell. Should it ever be in my power to render you a service, you will find me willing to do so, if it be only to make suitable atonement for the wrong which Meagles inflicted upon you. Farewell!"

"Farewell, dear Lady Lade," returned Mrs. Fitzherbert, who, now that the Amazon was unable to assist her in obtaining a high title and a large pension, would not have appeared quite so friendly toward the good-natured huntress, were it not on account of the little secret touching and concerning Miss Plantagenet.

Lady Lade then bowed to the Duchess of Devonshire and took her departure.

"Now, madam," said the prince, turning toward Mrs. Fitzherbert, the instant that the door had closed behind the widowed huntress, "I request your attention for a few minutes. From the observations which I ere now made, you have learned that I am well informed upon certain matters, and that therefore I cannot possibly regret our separation. More explicit I do not wish to be, unless it were to observe that I came hither this morning for the purpose of ascertaining whether certain information which I received were really true, and that under the name and garb of Miss Plantagenet —"

"Wherefore say more upon that head?" exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire. "The breach between yourself and Fitzherbert is past all power of healing; and it is evi-

dently unnecessary to widen it. A grand change is about to take place in the position of your Royal Highness, your future bride arrived last evening in the Thames, to-day she comes to London — "

"Ah! then the event draws nigh?" murmured Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a tone indicative of deep emotion. "One wife in a prison — another in a palace — "

"Speak not in these terms," exclaimed the prince, bending harsh and angry looks upon the unhappy lady. "Whatever you may have been to me, you are nothing now. Nor can you be at a loss to comprehend my motives for saying this. The bare mention of the town of Plombiers should bring the burning blush to your cheeks — "

"Ah! this is cruel," murmured Mrs. Fitzherbert, covering her face with her hands, while the Duchess of Devonshire, who knew nothing of her friend's amour with the Marquis of Bellois, was at a loss to conceive the meaning of the allusion which had just affected her so powerfully.

"But as if that were not enough," continued the prince, in a louder and more angry tone, "you entice hither your Lady Lades to plot with you, and your Miss Plantagenets — But, when I think of it," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself, "I should like to see how that maudlin sentimentalist, with all the sickly devotion of love and worship toward Miss Pauline Clarendon — "

And while he was yet speaking, his Royal Highness opened the bedroom door and walked into that chamber.

But he was disappointed in his hope of finding Miss Plantagenet there; and an open door, leading upon the landing, at once explained by which means the bird had flown.

"I learned from the man down-stairs that two ladies had arrived in the carriage which I saw waiting outside," observed the prince, returning into the parlour and addressing himself to the Duchess of Devonshire; "but the fellow did not know who the ladies were. You are one, Georgiana; who was the other? "

"The Countess of Desborough accompanied me," was the immediate reply, given without a moment's reflection that there might be any harm in thus associating Eleanor's name with the sponging-house adventures.

"Now I presume her ladyship has gone away with Miss

Plantagenet," exclaimed the prince. "Is it not so? Ah! I see by your countenance, Georgiana, that I have guessed the truth. Upon my honour, this is capital — delicious!"

"But, Eleanor," began the duchess, by way of defending the countess from any imputation which the prince might fancy to throw upon her, "does not for an instant suspect that her companion —"

"Better and better!" cried the prince, in the exultation of a malicious glee. "Oh, this is admirable, — admirable! The haughty Eleanor of Desborough undertaking to become the protectress and chaperon of Miss Plantagenet, from the door of a sponging-house to any other house into which the said Miss Plantagenet may choose to lead her ladyship —"

"Really your Royal Highness does not appear to have much use for your time, since you can afford to waste it in such idle scurrility," exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire; for she was not only inclined to become the championess of her absent friend from those motives which in such a case prompt one woman to defend another, but she was likewise annoyed and disgusted at the whole tenor of the prince's conduct on the present occasion. "To come to the point at once," she said, after a few moments' pause, "do you intend to release Fitzherbert from her present embarrassments, or leave that duty to be performed by her friends?"

"I have come hither to make Mrs. Fitzherbert a certain proposal," replied the prince. Then, drawing forth a packet of letters from beneath his cloak, and displaying them before the eyes of that lady, he said, "I presume, madam, that you recognize this correspondence?"

"I do," answered Mrs. Fitzherbert, instantaneously perceiving that the prince held in his hand all the letters which she had sent to the Marquis de Bellois; and the blood rushed to her cheeks, a moment before so pale.

"The next step for me to take," continued the Prince of Wales, "is to count down five bank-notes of a thousand pounds each. There is the amount. And now," he added, opening a paper which he took from his waistcoat pocket, "here is a short deed setting forth and declaring that no marriage ceremony nor any matrimonial rite was ever performed in any church, chapel, or private house, by any

clergyman or priest of whatsoever denomination, between Mrs. Fitzherbert and myself — "

"And what is the object of that document?" demanded the lady, with feverish impatience.

"It is for you to sign, madam," responded the prince, with the calm assurance of a man who knows that he can carry matters with a high hand against all opposition.

"Never!" ejaculated Mrs. Fitzherbert, her quivering lips becoming as bloodless as her countenance, while her whole form trembled visibly.

"Then listen, madam, to the observations I am about to make," said his Royal Highness. "Circumstances place me in a desperate position, and the proceedings I shall adopt will prove of an equally desperate character. Fortunately the authority of the Home Office backs me at this moment; otherwise, perhaps, you and my other enemies might stand a chance of triumphing over me. You refuse to sign this paper? Be it so: but I must warn you of the consequences."

"Dare you threaten me?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, partially recovering her presence of mind in the face of the cold-blooded, brutal, heartless tyrant whose head had so often lain pillowed upon her bosom and upon whom she had been wont to lavish such tender caresses.

"I dare speak what I mean, ay, and perform what I threaten," he exclaimed, a sardonic smile for an instant wavering upon his lips, and proving that there was a tinge of fiendish malignity mingled amongst the other dark shades of his character. "Know, then, that if you refuse your signature to this document, madam, I shall at once release you from this place of captivity, but it will only be to have you hurried on board a ship and transported to North America. Remember that the Habeas Corpus Act is suspended; and your forced exile may be accomplished safely, securely, and immediately. The world will believe that the once gay and brilliant Mrs. Fitzherbert has voluntarily fled the country in order to avoid the consequences of those debts with which she is overwhelmed; and should any satirist, pamphleteer, or scandalmonger dare to publish aught wherein her name and mine are inconveniently associated, the correspondence with the Marquis de Bellois shall be printed and issued so that a true light may be thrown on the character of Mrs. Fitzherbert. What would the world

say then? Why, that I — the Prince of Wales — had been made the dupe of a vile, profligate, intriguing woman; and while all the indignation would be levelled against you, madam, all the sympathy would redound upon me. Then, with such a state of public feeling, of what utility would it be for your friends to publish anything more relative to our past connection and its true nature? The popular voice would drown the echoes of any complaints which your adherents in this country might raise, while you would be powerless in a far-off clime. And if in addition to the revelations which your correspondence with the Marquis de Bellois contains, anything be wanting to convince the world of your real character, the incidents of the sponging-house — "

"Enough — enough!" murmured the unhappy woman, in a hoarse thick voice; for she felt the truth — the crushing, overpowering truth — of all the consequences which the heir apparent thus mercilessly shadowed forth.

"In the name of Heaven, let this scene draw to a speedy close!" exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire, who was deeply affected on the one hand and incensed on the other, for while she pitied Mrs. Fitzherbert from the bottom of her soul, she was disgusted at the heartless conduct of the prince.

"I am in his power — I am at his mercy," said the persecuted lady, clinging to the arm of the duchess, and bursting into tears. "Oh, what do you advise, Georgiana? What shall I do?"

"Give your signature to the document, my dear friend," hastily whispered the duchess. "Resistance will be useless — opposition will ruin you altogether."

"But he dares not perpetrate all the frightful outrages he has threatened," murmured Mrs. Fitzherbert, hastily drawing Georgiana aside.

"You see that his position is desperate, and he will do anything and everything that circumstances may suggest," was the reply given by the Duchess of Devonshire, in the same low and scarcely audible tone as that in which Mrs. Fitzherbert had spoken.

"Well, what is the decision?" demanded the prince, turning back again from the window to which he had ad-

vanced while the preceding colloquy of a few moments was hurriedly whispered between the two ladies.

"I will sign the paper," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a low and almost sepulchral tone, and with such an unnatural calmness of demeanour that it was positively more frightful to behold than the wildest rage could possibly have been; for it appeared as if a volcano were ready to burst forth from beneath that surface so terrible in its tranquillity.

Then, seating herself at the table, and with a hand that was steadied by the nerve of desperation, she affixed her signature to the paper; but the moment that her name was traced thereon — indeed, before the eye had time to wink after the last letter of the word Fitzherbert was formed — she dashed down the pen with a frantic gesture, exclaiming as she started wildly from her seat, "There, I have sold myself as completely as if it were to Satan!"

Ay, and like Satan, too, did his Royal Highness smile with a malignant triumph as he snatched up the document from within the reach of the now fearfully excited lady; and spreading it open upon the opposite side of the table, he said, "Now, Georgiana, you will have the kindness to attest it."

"I will have nothing to do with it," exclaimed the duchess, her countenance suddenly glowing with indignation, as she drew her magnificent form proudly up to its full height and cast a look of haughty anger upon the prince.

"Then the bailiff must be summoned to attest the deed — that's all," observed his Royal Highness, with cool insolence.

"Ah, spare me this crowning indignity, Georgiana," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert. "Let us yield to the despotic will of — that heartless man," she added, the words hissing between her lips with the spite of a serpent.

"If it be your desire that I should sign the paper, my dearest friend," cried the duchess, "I will do so; but not unless."

"Yes, better your attestation, Georgiana, than that of a stranger who will make the contents of this deed the subject of his tavern talk," replied Mrs. Fitzherbert, with a thrilling acrimony in her tone.

The duchess accordingly affixed her signature as witness to the deed, which the prince instantly took up and secured

about his person. He then pointed to the bank-notes which lay upon the table, resumed his cloak and hat, bowed coldly and distantly to the two ladies, and quitted the room.

An hour afterward Mrs. Fitzherbert, attended by one of the Duchess of Devonshire's lady's-maids, was proceeding in a travelling-carriage to her Grace's villa near Aylesbury, in which retirement the unhappy lady determined to remain until the bustle of the prince's marriage should be over.

But, oh, was it not with an aching heart and a reeling brain that she was now compelled to contemplate the overthrow of all her dearest hopes? Was it not with a deep, deep bitterness that in her soul she cursed that weakness on her part which had so seriously compromised her with the Marquis of Bellois and also in the affair of the self-styled Miss Plantagenet, as to enable her royal husband to seize upon those incidents as weapons to turn against herself?

Ruined, crushed, trampled under foot by the man who had so lately appeared to cherish her, the unhappy lady found but a partial relief in the floods of tears which the agonizing sense of her fallen condition now wrung from her eyes, as she was whirled along the road toward that place of seclusion whither her wounded pride prompted her to fly.

CHAPTER XXIV

LADY JERSEY

On quitting the sponging-house, the Prince of Wales muffled himself up in his cloak in such a manner as to conceal his countenance so as to escape recognition; and in a few minutes he entered a plain carriage which was waiting for him near the bottom of Chancery Lane. He immediately ordered the coachman to drive to St. James's Palace, where the king, queen, princes, and princesses — in fine, all the royal family — were assembled to receive Caroline of Brunswick, who was expected in a few hours. The Prince of Wales sought an immediate interview with his father alone; and when they were together, his Royal Highness handed him the document which Mrs. Fitzherbert had just signed in the sponging-house.

"There, Sire, is the paper which you demanded of me," said the prince. "It contains the acknowledgment on a certain lady's part — "

"Which I wanted, eh?" interrupted the king. "Well, well, I am glad of that, — glad of that;. and now Pitt will not hesitate to get your debts paid for you."

Some further discourse took place upon this occasion, and upon that topic, between the king and the prince; but it is unnecessary to place it upon record. We may however observe that his Majesty, after a long interview of two hours with his son, recommended that he should return to Carlton House and compose his thoughts so as to be enabled to meet the Princess of Brunswick with a smiling countenance. To this proposal the heir apparent cheerfully assented; but instead of repairing homeward, he went and amused himself at a private billiard-table for an hour. He then drove to Carlton House, it being now two o'clock in the

afternoon; and, on arriving there, he learned from Germain that the Countess of Jersey was in one of the drawing-rooms.

"Ah! then the princess has arrived in London?" murmured the heir apparent, with a tightening sensation at the heart; and, throwing off his hat and cloak, he at once proceeded to the apartment where Lady Jersey was anxiously waiting to see him.

This lady, who has not been hitherto introduced to our readers, was one of the numerous mistresses of the royal voluptuary.

Her beauty was of that dark, warm, and glowing style which invests its possessor with an air of eternal youthfulness and defies the ravages both of dissipation and time. Thus even the closest observer of the phases of woman's appearance at the different stages of her life would have been able to hazard no nearer conjecture relative to the age of Lady Jersey than that she was between thirty and forty, but whether nearer the former or the latter point it was impossible to decide. And yet that conjecture would have been erroneous; for she was now in her forty-second year.

She was tall and exquisitely formed, a little inclined to stoutness, and yet not too much to impair the gracefulness of her movements or the elegance of her figure. Her bust was grandly developed, as was usually the case with all the prince's favourites; but her waist was naturally delicate without the need of undue compression, and her limbs were exquisitely modelled, so as to give grace to her attitudes and render her walk light and her bearing dignified and imposing. In her person were thus united the luxuriousness of full and glowing charms and the elegant flexibility which rendered her as brilliantly attractive in the dance as she was fitted by nature and appearance for amorous dalliance and sensuous enjoyment.

The warmth of her temperament was indeed evident in every turn and expression of her features, where a voluptuous softness was mingled with a bolder and more decided look, denoting strength of mind and an unprincipled character. But over these indications of mental power and evil passions, that languishing ardour which arose from her sensuous nature threw so delicious a gloss that the impression her appearance left upon the observer was that of a woman formed for love and pleasure, and too indolent in her luxuri-

ous imagination to direct her thoughts to intrigues of any less tender character.

Her complexion was a clear olive, with a carnation tint of health upon the cheeks, which were plump and yet soft to the eye; the lips were of the brightest scarlet and slightly pouting, bearing the appearance of a delicious fruit in its full ripeness and with a dew upon it; the teeth were faultlessly even, all perfect in number, and white as ivory; the nose was aquiline and beautifully formed, with nostrils of the delicate red of the rose-leaf; and the chin was sweetly rounded.

The neck of this splendid creature was long and arching. A gradual slope formed the broad chest, whence the bosoms rose grandly like two globes of the lightest bronze with the pinky tint of warm, glowing, living flesh. The shoulders, plump and full, had likewise their beauteous slope; and the arms were modelled in a symmetry that could not possibly be surpassed.

Her hair, which was of darkest sable, had that gentle and scarcely perceptible undulation which denotes the fervour of the blood and the thirst for voluptuous pleasures. A rich gloss was upon it, making an alternation of light and shade with the wavy surface that was of such velvet smoothness to the touch. Her eyes were black, and they shone, in their bluish liquid whites, beneath the jetty fringes which overhung them in silken length and thickness.

Her hand was incomparably beautiful. The fingers were long and tapering, and the nails were of the fine almond shape, with the rosy tinge of vigorous health leaving the crescent, where they joined the flesh at the bottom, of pellucid whiteness. Beneath the transparent olive skin of the superb arms might be seen the faint blue tracery of the veins, — those veins in which the blood ran hot and furious.

Her feet and ankles were as faultless as her hands; and when she stood either in the dignity of her rank or in the grace of her womanhood, the eye would wander with an inexpressible feeling of delight over the flowing outlines of that form which gave just so much shapeliness to its drapery as to afford an idea of the rich contours and the symmetrical length of limb that it concealed. No, not altogether concealed; for, according to the fashion of the times, Lady

Jersey wore her dress so low as to display at least all the upper half of her glowing bust, while her arms were entirely bare.

This lady had a very kind and indulgent husband, who entertained not the least objection to his wife being the known and all but acknowledged mistress of the heir apparent. Had this same Lord Jersey found her out in an intrigue with a lackey or any other plebeian, he would instantaneously have thrust her forth in ignominy from his abode, and appealed, with all the energy of an outraged husband, to the proper tribunals for a divorce. But as it was to royalty that his spouse thus prostituted herself, and as it was with the heir apparent to the British throne that she became an adulteress, his lordship actually looked upon the noble lady's shame as a source of immense honour to himself.

Again, had Lady Jersey been only suspected of an intrigue with a valet, she would have been excluded from all decent society in a moment; but, being the harlot of the Prince of Wales, she was courted, flattered, worshipped, and caressed by all the members, male and female, of the world of fashion.

That she was as intriguing in other matters as she was in love, we may safely proclaim to be a fact; and that she was as dangerous as she was beautiful, and as designing as she was captivating, are truths known to all who are in the least acquainted with the history of the British court.

Such was the siren who was now waiting to see the prince, and who was lounging on a sofa in the drawing-room at Carlton House when his Royal Highness made his appearance on his return from the billiard-table.

"Well, what tidings, my sweet friend?" demanded the prince, impatiently, as he snatched a kiss from Lady Jersey's pouting lips.

"Her Royal Highness the Princess Caroline of Brunswick has just arrived in London," responded the fair patrician, her words flowing in a voice of rich harmony, but in the measured tone which an ill-concealed spite imparted to her utterance.

"You have been with her—you have seen her—you have conversed with her," said the prince, his manner indicating a mixture of painful suspense and excitement. "You can now, then, tell me everything, and yet I dread to ask you a single question. Oh, I am haunted with wretched, wretched presentiments concerning this marriage. But in one word,

my dear Frances, in one word, tell me," exclaimed the heir apparent, with a strange abruptness of both voice and manner, " is she a fit wife for me? "

The lady raised her countenance toward the prince with an expression of mingled commiseration and alarm; but we need hardly say that this was an air which she assumed in order to pique his curiosity the more acutely and render his suspense the more profoundly poignant, for she was a very serpent in the aptitude of duplicity, and her guile was the more dangerous because her winning and seductive manner invested it with all the semblance of truth. Thus were her artifices rendered irresistibly insidious by the appearance of sincerity in which she clothed them; and not only was she an adept in disguising the most venomous sentiments in the most honeyed language, but her dupes would drink in the poison of her looks and fancy that it was a delicious balm which those eyes so full of seeming tenderness were pouring into the heart.

Thus, when she now raised her charming countenance in a half-sympathizing, half-deprecating manner toward the prince, as she sat upon a voluptuous sofa, and he stood in nervous trepidation before the fire, — and when he saw that look into which she threw just enough pity to startle him, and just enough apprehension to torture him with suspense, — it never for an instant struck him that all this was a mere wicked affectation on the part of Lady Jersey.

" My dearest friend," he murmured, in a tone deeply agitated, " will you answer the question which I put to you? "

" And that question? " said Lady Jersey, interrogatively, as if she wished to gain time ere she gave a response.

" I demand once more," cried the prince, now goaded almost to desperation, " whether you consider her — the princess, I mean — a fit wife for me? "

" No, I do not," replied Lady Jersey, speaking as if she had only brought herself by means of a great and repugnant effort to give utterance to such a response.

" Deal candidly with me," said the prince in a low deep voice, as he placed himself by the side of his mistress upon the sofa. " My brother the Duke of Clarence, who saw the princess the year before last at Brunswick, has given me a glowing account of her beauty, her amiability, and her

accomplishments. Moreover, a private letter which I received from Brunswick yesterday assures me that the princess is altogether very pleasing in personal appearance, that her bust is good, that her teeth are fine, that her eyes are full of intelligence, that her bearing is dignified and majestic, and that her manners are characterized by sweetness, condescension, and affability. Such is the report which I have received; in an hour or two I shall be enabled to judge for myself. But do, dear Jersey, do, in the meantime, delineate the portraiture of the princess according to the conception which you have formed, and tell me frankly, candidly, and unreservedly why you do not consider her a fitting wife for me."

"Yes, I will speak unreservedly, since you wish it, George," said that fiendlike woman who wore so angelic a shape. And as she breathed those words with a voice and manner of the utmost apparent sincerity, she allowed her delicate hand to play caressingly with the prince's hair.

"Proceed, dearest," observed his Royal Highness, flattered by the seemingly improvised token of fondness thus bestowed upon him. "Explain to me frankly all your impressions concerning my future wife."

"And all I have heard likewise?" said her ladyship, in a tone of inquiry which seemed full of artlessness.

"Yes, and all you have heard, provided it be from good authority," added his Royal Highness. "But pray keep me not in suspense."

"I will not, because I love you, George, and I sympathize with you," returned Lady Jersey, fixing upon him a look of burning desire. "In the first place, then, I must inform you that Mrs. Aston, Lord Claremont, and myself, in pursuance of your instructions, repaired yesterday to Greenwich to receive her Royal Highness on her landing. The royal yacht did not, however, arrive at Greenwich from Gravesend until about ten o'clock this morning; and the princess landed at the hospital. Her Royal Highness was received by the governor, who had refreshments prepared; and I was then enabled to study the appearance of the princess with some degree of attention. Her countenance may certainly be called pretty; but it is not expressive of either softness or intelligence. Her eyes are fine, but have a bold look. Her teeth are good in front, but the back ones are decayed —"

"You do not mean that?" exclaimed the prince, starting with an irrepressible feeling of disgust.

"I not only observed it when her Royal Highness laughed heartily, which she did on two or three occasions during the luncheon," said Lady Jersey; "but Mrs. Harcourt, the bedchamber woman who has accompanied her Royal Highness from Brunswick, subsequently assured me that such was the fact. Indeed, if I dared mention the anecdote — But no —"

"Tell me what is now uppermost in your mind, Frances, I insist upon it!" exclaimed the prince, with passionate vehemence. "Nay, I even command you," he added, in a still more excited manner when he saw that her ladyship was hesitating.

"But the anecdote was told to me in strict confidence by Mrs. Harcourt," urged the siren, thus artfully goading the prince's curiosity to an intolerable degree of poignancy.

"And you will likewise tell it to me in strict confidence," was the heir apparent's rejoinder.

"Well, if you force me to be thus explicit, I must yield," said the designing creature, affecting to heave a profound sigh. "The truth is, then, that during the journey from Brunswick — or rather when the royal party was stopping at Osnabruck — the princess had a decayed tooth drawn; and she sent it, wrapped up in a piece of paper, to Lord Malmesbury."

"By God! if this were really true," exclaimed his Royal Highness, springing from the sofa in a state of almost wild excitement.

"I have told you the anecdote, George, precisely as it was related to me," said Lady Jersey, assuming a low and mournful tone, as if she were grieved at having been compelled to repeat such a tale.

"Oh, this is too much — too much!" cried the prince, now pacing to and fro in the greatest agitation. "Such a piece of disgusting indelicacy affords a key to the reading of the entire character of this woman whom I am expected to cherish as my wife. But I must compose myself — I must subdue my feelings — "

"Yes, you must summon all your courage and presence of mind to your aid, my well-beloved friend," said the Countess of Jersey, now approaching the prince and taking his hand gently in both her own.

"Then you have more to tell me?" he exclaimed, suffering her to lead him back to the sofa. "And now proceed, Jersey, tell me all — everything," he added, as soon as they were again seated side by side.

"I was describing to you the princess's personal appearance," resumed the artful lady. "Her hair is what may politely and flatteringly be called a light auburn; but, were it seen upon the head of a servant girl, we should plainly and undisguisedly denominate it red. Her eyebrows are very light, indeed she has scarcely any. Her nose is bold and masculine, her lips are somewhat coarse. Her stature is short — decidedly short, and her figure is common and vulgar. You will pardon me for being thus explicit, George; but as you have insisted on hearing a description of my first impressions, I am bound to give them with frankness, although in sorrow," added Lady Jersey, with every appearance of sincerity in tone, look, and manner.

"Go on — go on," exclaimed the prince, hurriedly. "I wish you to speak frankly — I thank you for this candour. It is a proof of your love, your friendship," he continued, vainly struggling against the agitation of his feelings; "and it is the more kind and considerate on your part, Frances, because I am now prepared for the worst — the very worst — and the crowning shock, when we meet face to face, will be the less terrible. Go on, then, go on."

"The bust of the princess," continued the patrician *intriguante*, "is full and large; but there does not appear to be that plumpness — that firmness — which you adore so much."

And, as she thus spoke with an affected bashfulness and in a simpering tone, she looked down at her own exuberant charms which rose so grandly from the corsage that left them half-revealed.

"How cruelly I have been deceived by every one except by you!" cried the prince, in a tone of exceeding bitterness. "My brother, the princess's portrait, my own private emissary at Brunswick, the newspapers, — all have represented Caroline as a beauty — "

"And do you think, dear George, that I would mislead you for a single moment?" interrupted Lady Jersey, in her softest and most insinuating tones. "Such a proceeding on my part were ridiculous, because within the next hour or

two you will have met your future wife, and have had an opportunity to judge for yourself."

"Yes, yes, I believe you, my sweet friend, I believe you," murmured the prince, not knowing how to restrain the bitter vexation which the designing woman had thus succeeded in exciting within him. "But pray resume your description, and let me be fully prepared for all that I may have to encounter."

"There is assuredly nothing elegant nor yet graceful in the figure of her Royal Highness," said Lady Jersey. We may perhaps as well observe that the Princess Caroline was spoken of as her Royal, instead of Serene Highness (trumpery distinction!) from the instant that she landed in England, and before her marriage with the heir apparent took place. "As for the bearing of her Royal Highness being majestic," continued Lady Jersey, "such a statement could only be looked upon as one of those fulsome compliments which are invariably paid to royal or illustrious personages. For no individual would be so disloyal and no newspaper so bold as to proclaim the real truth," added her ladyship. "It is the grovelling, servile, and spaniel-like character of Englishmen to puff off everything royal, simply because it is royal. In their eyes royalty cannot be ugly, wicked, inelegant, or disgusting. But were the same truth to be told of the Princess Caroline of Brunswick as would be spoken were she a cook or a dairymaid, her personal appearance would be summed up in these terms: pretty face, but bold and impudent expression, reddish hair, large and lascivious-looking eyes, big Roman nose, coarse lips, pig's eyebrows, decaying teeth, — consequently bad breath, — short thick neck, large bust, but the fulness of which seems more matron-like than virginal, projecting shoulder-blades, short stature, common-looking and vulgar figure, mien anything but imposing, gait decidedly awkward."

"And such is the future Princess of Wales, ay, and the future Queen of England," said the heir apparent, in a slow, measured, and solemn tone, as if he were taking in at one deliberative glance all the defects that had just been enumerated and which were so well calculated to shock and disgust even a mind far less sensitive than his own. "But, by the living God!" he exclaimed, suddenly becoming passionately excited, "she shall never be Queen of England. No,

they may compel me to accompany her to the altar and thereby make her Princess of Wales, but I swear, by heaven and by hell, that she shall never be Queen of England."

As he gave utterance to these mingled imprecations and asseverations, his Royal Highness again started to his feet and began to pace the room with rapid and uneven steps; while, the moment the back was turned toward her, an expression of fiendlike triumph swept over the lovely countenance of Lady Jersey.

"Have you anything more to tell me, my dear friend?" abruptly demanded the prince, as he stopped short at the expiration of a minute, and, abandoning his agitated walk, returned to the sofa.

"I have explained my impressions relative to the personal appearance of her Royal Highness," said Lady Jersey, affecting an extreme reluctance to continue the topic; "what more can I tell you?"

"Her manners, her mind, her accomplishments," exclaimed the prince, hurriedly; "have you nothing to say on all those points? Did you yourself receive no impressions relative thereto? Did Mrs. Harcourt vouchsafe no confidential communications? Was Malmesbury himself utterly silent? Come, I see by your looks that you are not altogether ignorant on those heads —"

"But if I have nothing cheering — nothing favourable to impart," interrupted her ladyship, still affecting reluctance.

"At all events it will be the truth," was the immediate response of the prince, who was thus drinking in with unconscious avidity all the poisoned draughts of misrepresentation and exaggeration which the artful woman poured into his soul.

"You force me into revelations and avowals which give me exquisite pain because I see that they hurt you," said her ladyship. "But since you are so obstinate, I am bound to obey. You must know, then, that while the princess retired for a short time after luncheon, I had an opportunity of conversing with Mrs. Harcourt. It was then that she told me the anecdote concerning the extracted tooth at Osnabruck. She is a woman of keen perception, retentive memory, and gossiping disposition. She talks rapidly, and imparts a vast amount of information in an incredibly short space of time. Accordingly, I learned that the Prin-

cess Caroline is so ignorant, she cannot write a decent hand much less spell accurately."

"Good Heavens! is this indeed possible?" exclaimed his Royal Highness, now more indignant than vexed. "Why, it is a positive insult to me, to the royal family, to the British nation, to have sent over such a creature to be my wife. But go on — go on; nothing will surprise me now!"

"Mrs. Harcourt informs me," resumed Lady Jersey, "that the princess is volatile, frivolous, and often impertinent. That she is ill-mannered, familiar, and at times utterly oblivious of her rank and station, I myself could perceive during the few hours that I have this day passed in the company of her Royal Highness. She talks indiscreetly, gives utterance to anything that comes uppermost in her mind, and frequently rattles away with a marvellous affectation of wit and humour. On such occasions, Mrs. Harcourt assures me, she will giggle in the most childish manner; and, what is worse, she of course expects that every one will smile at her bad jokes and obscure jocularities. Nor is she very particular as to the language she makes use of; and she certainly said two or three things in my presence this morning which savoured of downright indelicacy. Her Royal Highness was brought up, it is generally understood, with much severity; indeed, her own father the duke said to Lord Malmesbury a few weeks ago at Brunswick, 'She is not a fool; but she has no discretion. She has been closely looked after, and I can assure your lordship it was necessary.' What this could possibly mean," continued Lady Jersey, "I must leave you, my dear George, to conjecture; but very certain it is that the ideas and language of your future wife are somewhat loose, despite the severity of her rearing."

"This is a picture well calculated to gladden me," observed the heir apparent, bitterly. "Complete it, my dear Frances, complete it, I pray you."

"Lord Malmesbury communicated to Mrs. Harcourt the opinion which the Duke of Brunswick had expressed concerning his daughter," continued the Countess of Jersey, "and dear gossiping Mrs. Harcourt has not hesitated to reveal everything to me. But would you believe it, my dear George, that the princess is positively of dirty habits—"

"What!" ejaculated his Royal Highness, now contemplating his artful companion with dismay.

"It is as I tell you," persisted Lady Jersey, every instant growing bolder and less scrupulous in her allegations against the unfortunate Caroline of Brunswick. "Lord Malmesbury was positively compelled to remonstrate with her Royal Highness upon the slovenliness of her habits, the filth of her apparel, and the disgusting neglect of her person, which was but too evident. He plainly and openly told her that she was positively offensive on that account, and that she could not fail to disgust her future husband. Mrs. Harcourt has indeed seen portions of Lord Malmesbury's diary in which all these various conversations are duly recorded, — doubtless to be one day published to the world."

"Oh, Frances, Frances, I am distressed beyond all power of description!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, literally writhing with the mental anguish which these shocking disclosures had naturally excited. "What am I to do? What course can I adopt? If I refuse to receive the princess as my wife, the Ministers will refuse to pay my debts, and these at this moment amount to six hundred thousand pounds. Oh, my God! I already loathe, detest, abominate the German wretch that has been chosen as my bride."

And covering his face with his hands, the prince yielded to no affected nor even moderate grief. It was the first time in his life — or at least for many a year — that he had thus given way to such affliction; and its sting was fraught with an indescribable bitterness.

And now the Countess of Jersey, having worked her royal lover up to this unspeakable pitch of wretchedness, and being perfectly satisfied in her own mind that she had thoroughly disgusted him with the unfortunate Caroline of Brunswick, — no matter how different the princess might really prove from the hideous picture thus delineated, — the Countess of Jersey, we say, began to console the heir apparent to the best of her ability.

"Well, I must not be downcast," exclaimed the prince at length. "My father and the Ministers may compel me to marry this German creature, but they cannot force me to love her. They may drive me to the altar to accept her hand in marriage, but they cannot constrain me to give her

my heart in return. No, nor in compelling me to take a wife can they force me to surrender up any one of my mistresses."

"Nothing, nothing should induce me to forget or abandon you, my own beloved prince," exclaimed the Countess of Jersey, flinging her arms about the neck of his Royal Highness and covering his countenance with kisses. Then, throwing herself back upon the sofa, and making him recline in her arms in such a manner that his head lay pillowed upon her bosom, she said, "Repose thus with me for a few minutes, my George. It cannot be long ere the summons will arrive for you to repair to St. James's Palace to greet your bride."

"Would that the hateful ceremony were over," exclaimed the prince. "But, thank Heaven, when once the knot is tied, you will then become a resident beneath this roof, my dearest Frances, in your capacity of lady of the bedchamber to her Royal Highness — "

"And supposing that the princess should be jealous?" said the countess, with a smile that revealed her pearly teeth.

"You will be protected by me against her anger," was the prompt reply of the royal lover. "But you have given me no details of the landing of the princess, of the reception which you experienced at her hands — "

"Ah! I had forgotten," interrupted the countess. "But it may all be summed up in a few words. Obedient to your instructions, Lord Claremont, Mrs. Harvey Aston, and myself proceeded to Greenwich to meet the princess. She was overwhelmingly polite to me, — I know not wherefore, — but such was the fact. Lord Malmesbury, methought, treated me with a proportionate degree of coldness. For this, however, I cared little. I sat next to the princess at the luncheon given by the governor of the hospital; and her Royal Highness chattered a great deal to me and Mrs. Aston. Afterward the princess withdrew to an apartment prepared for her, and where she chose to be alone for a short time; and in the interval I gleaned from Mrs. Harcourt the various pieces of information which I have already given you. Mrs. Aston, Mrs. Harcourt, and I were then summoned to attend upon her Royal Highness. The carriages were then ordered. Mrs. Harcourt and I accompanied the

princess, Mrs. Aston rode in the same vehicle with Lords Malmesbury and Claremont. There were very few persons assembled to witness the landing and the subsequent departure; nor did the carriages attract much observation along the road. In an hour from the moment that we left Greenwich Hospital, we alighted at St. James's Palace; and leaving the princess to receive such a welcome as the king, queen, princes, and princesses may think fit to give her, I pleaded indisposition and hurried away. But instead of proceeding homeward to lie down for a few hours," added the countess, laughing, "I came hither to hold this long discourse with you."

The prince was about to make some observation in reply, when the door was opened slowly, and Germain, who had purposely fidgeted a moment or two with the handle, in order to give due warning of his approach, entered the room. The heir apparent had therefore ample leisure to raise his head from the voluptuous pillow on which it had been reposing, while the countess had also a moment's grace to arrange her hair which the prince's caresses had somewhat disturbed.

"May it please your Royal Highness," said Germain, with a low bow, "their Majesties await your presence at St. James's Palace."

"A few minutes' attention to my toilet, and I obey the summons, Germain," exclaimed the prince.

The Countess of Jersey then took her departure; and his Royal Highness hurried to his own chamber, where he speedily made such changes in his apparel as he thought fit.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon of this memorable day that the Prince of Wales entered his state-carriage and drove to St. James's Palace close by, to meet for the first time the fated and foredoomed Caroline of Brunswick.

CHAPTER XXV

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

RETURN we now to that chamber in Whitechapel Workhouse where, at the close of a recent chapter, we left the parish surgeon alone with his patient, James Melmoth.

The morning, which had broken amidst such unseasonable gloom, was now brightening up, as we have already described the gladdening change at the moment when the Amazon was looking forth from the sponging-house window in Chancery Lane; but the sunbeams which now penetrated into the pauper infirmary in Whitechapel only seemed to mock and not to cheer the wretched aspect of the place.

Grim and wan in its sickliness was the expression of Melmoth's countenance, as those beams played thereon through the windows which were curtained with naught save the dinginess of their own dirt; and yet the unhappy man smiled faintly, for the thought struck him at the moment how delightful it would be to roam in the open fields, and breathe the pure air of heaven instead of the fetid atmosphere of those foul infirmary rooms, and listen to the singing of birds instead of the complaints of neglected paupers and the growling of surly nurses.

"You feel better, my good man?" said the surgeon, as he observed that sickly smile into which the invalid's features had for a moment relaxed.

"Yes, somewhat better, sir," replied Melmoth. "I am glad that I have found my children, although we met under circumstances so dreadful — so very, very dreadful."

"What do you mean by dreadful circumstances?" asked the surgeon, seating himself on the edge of the bed and contemplating the invalid with a profound attention. "I can

understand that the meeting was painful, but to be dreadful — "

"Oh, do not question me, sir, do not question me!" exclaimed Melmoth, a frenzied expression suddenly sweeping over his countenance. "You will only wrest from me the most horrible of secrets, for they are already trembling at the tip of my tongue. Had you treated me harshly, I should have felt no inclination to tell you anything; but you have looked, you have spoken, you have acted kindly toward me, and I am inspired with an ardent longing to unbosom to your ears all the tremendous mysteries which are now entombed in my soul as a corpse in its sepulchre. But do not question me, I say, do not question me," cried the invalid, his whole form quivering with a dreadful spasm. "Although my inclination prompts me in one sense to make a confidant of you, yet in another do I shrink with indescribable horror from the bare idea. And to tell you the truth," added the man, his voice now sinking to a low hollow whisper, which sounded like the wintry breeze through a leafless tree, "there are times when I fancy that I have two minds, — two minds, separate and distinct, — one urging me in this direction, and the other in that."

And as Melmoth made the strange revelation in a tone of mysterious confidence, he gazed up into the surgeon's countenance with a look wherein the wildness of insanity and the mournfulness of a sad condition of self-knowledge were ominously blended.

We have already stated that the medical man was devoted to his profession and that he worshipped the art with as much enthusiasm as the most ardent lover could possibly experience toward his mistress. Such a peculiar case as that which he had evidently now before him was not therefore likely to be neglected or overlooked by such an earnest inquirer into the depths and mysteries of the medical world; indeed the surgeon had previously observed particular symptoms leading him to suspect that this was one of those examples of psychological eccentricity into which it was highly important to examine.

"My good friend," he accordingly said, in a soothing tone and with encouraging manner, "I am incapable of abusing any amount of confidence which you may feel disposed to place in me. A medical practitioner must observe good

faith in that respect as implicitly as if he were a father confessor. You tell me that you experience the effects of two separate inclinations, urging you in different directions — "

"Yes, it is so," ejaculated Melmoth, abruptly. "At this very moment I am the prey to a species of excruciating anxiety, prompting me to unbosom myself entirely to you, while on the other hand I feel that I would sooner perish the most wretched of deaths than betray the appalling secrets which I cherish here — here."

And the invalid beat his breast violently as he uttered these last words.

"Will you not look upon me as a friend?" inquired the surgeon, softly.

"Yes, yes, I must," murmured James Melmoth, with accents of feverish impatience. Then, suddenly clutching the arm of the medical man and gazing up with a kind of wild earnestness into his countenance, he said in a deep sepulchral tone, "Strange things occurred to me last night. But stoop down your head — lower — lower still. They must not overhear me in the next room. There, keep your head bent like that, and I can whisper in your ear."

The surgeon glanced with a momentary feeling of affright at the face of the invalid as he stooped his head in the manner desired; for Melmoth's countenance had suddenly become pale and livid, frenzy was now expressed in his glaring eyeballs, and his whole appearance was that of a maniac about to burst forth into all the terrific violence of a rabid fury. But stifling that sentiment of alarm with which so awful a spectacle for an instant inspired him, the medical man placed himself in the position most convenient to catch anything that the invalid might murmuringly breathe in his ear.

"The darkness was thick and tangible last night," Melmoth resumed, with startling abruptness, "as I rose from my pallet and looked forth from the window. Yes, I looked forth, despite that pitchy blackness which filled the air; and my eyes could penetrate the dense atmosphere of night as if my glances were lightnings piercing through it. And it seemed as if there were a feeble glimmering that began to appear amidst that gloom a long way off; and this glimmering gradually grew brighter and brighter, until a churchyard, bathed in moonlight, stood out from amidst the utter

darkness that still enveloped all besides. It was the scene of cold silvery lustre viewed on the opposite bank of a river of ink, — a strange picture beheld through the medium of an atmosphere black as pitch. But, ah, what did I see in that churchyard?" demanded Melmoth, a strange spasm for a moment convulsing his features, as his fingers tightened with spasmodic violence in their grasp upon the surgeon's arm. "'Twas myself — my own self — lying asleep by the side of a grave, ay, and near a coffin which had been dragged up from that grave, — yes, and nigh also to the loathsome corpse torn forth from that coffin. And then methought my mind was transfused from myself into that image of myself which lay sleeping in the moonlit churchyard. In other words, it seemed as if I lost my own identity as I stood at the window of this workhouse room, and became changed into the being that was pillowed upon the wormy soil up-cast from the yawning grave close by. And I began to think with the mind of that sleeping counterpart of myself, and I began to see also with his eyes. For presently the deep, deep silence of the churchyard was broken by the low rustling of the garments of the grave, and hideous shapes began to glide through the moonlit air. Oh, it was horrible, — horrible! — for the cemetery was giving up its dead to render the night appalling, and the spectres of the departed were mingling them in death as never had they mingled in life! The pampered son of luxury and the occupant of the pauper's grave were close together there; the wealthy tradesman's wife, who had died of a surfeit, and the lank form of the needlewoman, done to death by famine and cold in one of the long, long nights of winter, were next to each other now. And there were the ghastly shapes of men and women who had been hanged, with the halters around their necks, and following the spectre of the hangman as he bore the accursed gibbet at the head of this awful group. Oh, it was horrible, horrible, and I saw it all! I heard the rustling of the winding-sheets as the ghastly multitude mustered in death's array and proceeded through the churchyard, over the graves and amidst the tombs, glidingly — glidingly. Yes, and I beheld their eyes gaze on me with stony glare as they passed by the spot where I lay entranced, or rather where lay that mysterious and supernatural image of myself. I could distinguish those who had

been interred a long time and had almost changed into the earth to which they were consigned, from those who had only been buried recently. For the former were loathsome with corruption and rottenness, while the latter had all the marble appearance of fresh corpses. With the former there were eyeless sockets, nose fallen in, lips drawn away from the teeth, which were thus left grinning horribly, the flesh rotting and discoloured, the shroud in rags. With the latter there were the regular outlines of feature, — the dull, fixed, stony gaze, the passionless tranquillity of countenance, the lips colourless as the cheeks, but covering the teeth, the under jaw held up by the white bandage, and the clean dry winding-sheet. Yes, I saw all this, I marked all this, my memory received an impress of all those details, as indelibly as if seared upon the brain by a red-hot iron. And then methought that I sprang suddenly from the spot where I had been lying in a profound sleep, that I seized upon one of those spectral shapes floating past me, that I felt its shroud rustling in the grasp of my right hand, and its flesh cold as ice to the touch of my left, that it slowly turned its marble countenance and bent its stony gaze upon me, that I felt its breath, cold, cold as wintry air upon my cheek, and that I recognized its features — O God! the features of my own wife."

Melmoth now fell back with a hollow moan, and, closing his eyes, lay like one dead.

The surgeon was alarmed, no, not alarmed exactly; for he was too much accustomed to see paupers die, to be able to care much about it; but he felt vexed at the idea that the present poor wretch might pass away before he should have wormed from him the clue to that morbid condition of mind whereof he had given such astounding proofs by the narrative of a dream which he had looked upon as a fact.

But on feeling Melmoth's pulse and placing a hand upon his heart, the surgeon discovered that life was not extinct, and he hastened to apply the usual restoratives. In a few minutes the patient recovered his senses, but was too much exhausted to speak. The surgeon accordingly administered some medicine, the effect of which was shortly to lull him into a gentle repose, and the medical man then quitted the infirmary, with an intimation to the nurse that he should return in the afternoon.

Now it happened that this surgeon was intimately acquainted with Mr. Thurston, in whose medical knowledge and psychological information he placed the utmost confidence. He accordingly repaired direct to the West End of the town, called May Fair, and communicated to Mr. Thurston the fact that there was at the present moment a very extraordinary case of mental hallucination in Whitechapel poorhouse. He entered into details, and the curiosity of Mr. Thurston was so excited, that he readily consented to accompany his friend to the eastern district of the metropolis and see the " curious patient." Luncheon was however served up first, and, moreover, Mr. Thurston had a few visits to pay in the neighbourhood; and then there were some recently acquired objects of interest to show in the surgery, such as a wen, as large as a Dutch cheese, taken off a man's head and preserved in a jar, an eye that was removed from its socket, the patient having received a blow thereon which had produced cancer, and the body of an infant which had been overlain in the parish workhouse. The luncheon being disposed of, the visits paid, and the curiosities duly inspected, Mr. Thurston's one-horse chaise was ordered around to the door; and it was about half-past three in the afternoon when the two medical gentlemen alighted at the gate of Whitechapel workhouse.

The surgeon of the establishment led the way direct to the infirmary, followed by Mr. Thurston; and as they passed through the larger room, of which mention has already been made, the former gentleman pointed to a group of three children, whispering at the same time to his friend, " Those two boys and that girl belong to the patient we are about to visit."

" Ah! poor devils," said Thurston, carelessly. " They look thin and pale enough."

" You should have seen them this morning, before they put on the clothes they are wearing now," observed the parish doctor, still speaking in a low tone; " they were positively horrible to gaze upon. But these things can't be helped, I suppose," he added, as he turned and led the way into the wretched crib where Melmoth was lying.

" There, do you see that gentleman along with the doctor of this place? " suddenly whispered the eldest of the three children, as he caught each of the other two with nervous

violence, by the arm. "Look, I mean that gentleman who is just following the doctor into father's room. Ah! he is the wicked, unkind, heartless man who took away poor baby's body and would not let it be buried," added young Melmoth, speaking in the lowest possible tone to his little brother and sister, while the tears ran down his emaciated countenance.

The boy and girl to whom he made that communication wept likewise, although they were too young to understand it altogether; and thus the poor children mingled their tears and their sobs with as much feeling as could possibly be experienced by the offspring of a duke and duchess.

Meantime the workhouse doctor and Mr. Thurston had entered the room where Melmoth was lying.

The invalid had slept for a few hours since the surgeon was with him in the morning; and he had awakened considerably refreshed. This assurance he now gave, when asked in the usual manner how he felt.

"And your mind, my good fellow, your mind?" said the workhouse surgeon, stooping down and whispering in Melmoth's ear. "You need not be afraid to speak in the presence of that gentleman who has accompanied me. He is an intimate friend, a brother professional —"

"Come to see us pauper patients out of curiosity, I suppose?" interrupted Melmoth, somewhat sternly. "Is it not so?"

"The interest which a medical practitioner takes in cases properly belonging to the sphere of his own profession cannot be looked upon as a mere idle curiosity," said the surgeon.

"Well, sir, I think you are right there," observed Melmoth, after a few moments' reflection. "But you have not mentioned to him anything of those wild vagaries which I poured into your ears this morning, I hope?" added the invalid, in a whisper so low and timid that it was scarcely audible.

"Do you think I would betray your confidence?" asked the surgeon with the well-assumed air of sincerity unjustly suspected. "But my friend will consider it strange that I should continue thus to talk to you in whispers. This poor man," he exclaimed aloud, turning at the same time toward Thurston, "is a patient in whom I take great interest."

"Indeed!" observed the May Fair practitioner. "Is

there anything peculiar in his case?" he inquired, with the tone and manner of one who had received no previous information on the subject.

"Badly wounded in numerous places, wonderful how he escaped with his life," responded the workhouse surgeon.

"How were the wounds caused?" asked Thurston.

"The poor man was passing through a field where some cockneys were shooting," replied the surgeon; "and he received in his own body the contents of the fowling-pieces of those awkward sportsmen."

"Small shot, I suppose?" said Thurston, inquiringly.

"Egad! they were such shot as you would not like to penetrate your skin, my dear friend," exclaimed the workhouse surgeon; "nor would you style them small, I think. In fact, two slugs had lodged in the calf of the right leg of the poor fellow, and a crooked nail was sticking in the left —"

"But surely sportsmen do not use such materials?" cried Thurston.

"I know nothing about it," responded the workhouse surgeon. "I never was out shooting in my life, and never wish to go. Duck-shot and swan-shot are like cabalistic characters to me; and I should not even have known that the things which I extracted were called slugs had not a pauper invalid in the next room told me so. But here they are."

And the medical gentleman produced them from his pocket.

"I beg your pardon," gasped Melmoth, on whom a violent agitation had been rapidly stealing during the colloquy just recorded; "but really, gentlemen, this discourse of yours —"

"Calm yourself, my good friend," said the workhouse surgeon; "we did not mean to distress you. Indeed, we could not possibly conceive that our remarks were calculated to annoy you."

"This is extraordinary — most extraordinary," murmured Mr. Thurston, as he inspected the slugs which his friend had put into his hand.

"Extraordinary indeed!" echoed the latter, but now likewise speaking in a subdued tone. "And you will agree with me that the whole case is more extraordinary still, when I assure you that the poor wretch has received not less than thirty wounds, and yet he escaped with his life."

"Extraordinary," repeated Thurston; "yes, marvellous,

miraculous! But, gracious God!" he suddenly exclaimed aloud, unable to control the feelings with which he was all in a moment inspired by the idea that now struck him.

"What, what do you mean?" gasped forth Melmoth, raising himself up to a sitting posture with the sudden strength of a poignant convulsion.

The two medical men simultaneously flung their looks upon him; and they actually recoiled from the ghastly horror which was depicted upon his countenance.

"Heavens! what ails you?" cried the workhouse surgeon; for, having neither caught nor understood the suspicion which had just flashed to the mind of Thurston, he could conceive no other reason for Melmoth's sudden excitement and dreadful aspect than that the unfortunate man was passing rapidly into a wild phase of insanity.

"What ails him?" repeated Thurston, shuddering all over. "Do you ask what ails him? Thirty wounds in different parts of his body, missiles of different descriptions extracted from his flesh — Ah! the reading of the mystery is no longer difficult, and we have before us the monster in human shape —"

"O God, have mercy upon me!" groaned Melmoth, sinking back upon his bolster.

"For Heaven's sake explain yourself," cried the workhouse surgeon, clutching Thurston violently by the arm. "You have raised my curiosity to an intolerable pitch —"

"Is it possible that you never read the newspapers?" interrupted the May Fair practitioner, his countenance expressing a horror almost as intense as that of the wretched man who lay gasping convulsively in the miserable pallet. "Know you not," continued Thurston, drawing his friend forcibly aside, "that for some time past a fiend in human shape has been rifling the last homes of the dead —"

"Holy God! yes, I remember now that I have both heard and read of those atrocities," interrupted the workhouse surgeon, a deadly pallor overspreading his features; "but I looked upon them as immense exaggerations, if not as downright inventions —"

"No, no; they were solemn truths," murmured Thurston, whose usually cold and imperturbable manner had become changed into the shuddering agitation of a horrible excitement. "And the journals the other morning reported how

a cemetery was violated in the dead of night, how the spring-gun placed in that churchyard exploded, how the monster must have been dangerously wounded — "

"Ah, my God! then this unhappy being is the wretched monomaniac who has perpetrated those horrors," exclaimed the workhouse surgeon, pointing in mingled disgust and pity toward the couch.

"'Tis true! 'tis true!" cried Melmoth, whose ears had caught the words last uttered. Then, covering his face with his hands, he exclaimed in a rending tone, "Kill me — kill me, I beseech you; but do not, oh, do not betray my horrible secret to the world! For the sake of my poor children, do not — I beg and implore you!"

"What in Heaven's name shall we do with him, Thurston?" demanded the workhouse surgeon, in a low tone which was rendered tremulous with dread horror.

"Thurston! who said Thurston?" suddenly yelled forth the invalid, springing up in his couch as if it were a corpse that was galvanized, so hideous was his aspect, and so fearful were the workings of his ghastly countenance. "Who mentioned the name of Thurston?" he demanded again and in a tone of the wildest excitement, his eyes glaring like those of a famished wolf.

"My name is Thurston," said the May Fair practitioner, the horror and loathing which he experienced toward the monster-man being somewhat absorbed for the instant by the curiosity which this sudden turn in the proceedings had excited.

"Then give me up the body of my babe," yelled forth the now almost rabid Melmoth; and, in the furious endeavour which he made to spring from the bed in order to attack the surgeon, he fell precipitately on the hard floor.

The violence of the concussion deprived him of his senses; but when he awoke to consciousness again, he was in utter darkness. For a few minutes he lay perfectly still, collecting his thoughts as well as he was able; and slowly, slowly, like the waves of a long swell flowing in one after the other when the hurricane has passed over the surface of the ocean, did the tide of memory roll in upon the brain of the monster-man. And soon the rush of recollections became more rapid, more painful, and more intolerably poignant, until the urges of memory boiled high and furious, and his whole being ap-

peared to be tossed upon the wild tempest of his whirling, scaring, dreadful, goading thoughts.

At length, in obedience to an impulse which prompted him to ascertain where he was, he endeavoured to stretch forth his arms to feel through the utter darkness in which he was entombed; but no, he was powerless — motionless.

He felt that he lay like a statue, unable to move a limb. Nevertheless, his sensations told him that he was in a bed and not in a coffin, as he had for an instant dreaded. But was he under the influence of a hideous nightmare which held him bound hand and foot? No; for he could just raise his head an inch or two from the bolster by the spontaneous motion of the neck; and he was assuredly awake, for he could now think of all kinds of subjects, he could direct his ideas into whatever channel he chose, and therefore was it beyond all doubt that he was not asleep.

But was he, then, in a trance? No; for he could impart a slight motion at will to his entire frame. His limbs were not held powerless by paralysis. They seemed as if held in the bondage of a tight-fitting vesture, the legs of the trousers being fastened to the mattress and the sleeves of the jacket sewn to the sides of that garment itself.

Ah! a light suddenly flashed in unto his brain: he was a lunatic, or at all events treated as one; and the accursed strait-waistcoat was upon him.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE GERMAN PRINCESS

It was four o'clock in the afternoon of that memorable day, and in a splendidly furnished apartment at St. James's Palace sat the Princess Caroline of Brunswick. At a short distance stood an elderly gentleman, with a patrician air and in a full court costume, and whose eyes were fixed with an appearance of profound respect upon her Royal Highness as she addressed her observations to him. No other persons were present at the time in that saloon, no ladies-in-waiting, no courtiers, no pages; the princess and her elderly companion were alone together, for the arrival of the Prince of Wales was now expected every moment.

Let us pause for a few minutes to give the reader the true portraiture of the Princess Caroline of Brunswick; and the result will show that if she were not quite so fascinating as the private emissary of the heir apparent had depicted in his correspondence from Germany, she was at all events very far from being the disgusting creature which the vile, profligate, and unprincipled Countess of Jersey had chosen to represent.

The princess was twenty-five years of age, and rather pretty than handsome. Her countenance expressed a girlish affability and artlessness mingled with the sweetest good humour; and it was evident, by the reading of every lineament of her face, that had she been born a peasant instead of a princess, she would have been the happiest, most joyous, unaffected, and lovable being that ever tripped over meadow or gathered early violets. It was impossible to gaze upon her for a minute without feeling a sorrowful conviction that the hoyden gladness and innocent gaiety of the natural mind had been warped, circumscribed, and modelled as it were

by the artificial ceremonies and formal observances of a court.

Her hair was of a light auburn, luxuriant, and glossy; and when worn in simple bands or in ringlets, without decoration, it was of itself as becoming an adornment as the most proudly born could possibly display or as the fairest of the sex could own. The eyes of the princess were not too large, nor were they bold in expression. They were handsome eyes, of a fine blue, and reflecting all the goodness of temper and generosity of heart which, being the natural characteristics of the princess, had survived the contamination of those cold, hollow, and insincere manners and habits that surrounded her at her father's court. At times the expression of those eyes could become melting and tender, but with a soft and delicate voluptuousness, and not with a coarse and meretricious licentiousness. Her eyebrows were not broadly defined; but they were sufficiently marked to prevent the general portraiture from being spoiled by any positive deficiency on that score.

Her lips were somewhat full, of a lively red, and with a dewy moisture constantly upon them. There was something luscious in their appearance; and while slightly pouting they were far from coarse. The expression of the mouth would have been perhaps sensuous, had not a smile of the most fascinating amiability been constantly playing upon it, — at times scarcely perceptible, though still lingering in girlish coyness there, at others more expansive in its unaffected sweetness and winning attraction. Then the teeth were as white, and as perfect, and as pure as two strings of pearls; and the breath was as fragrant as that of the early spring zephyr passing over the parterres of nascent flowers.

Her neck was not actually short, but wanted the graceful arching to render it beautiful and the statuesque carriage to make it dignified. Its delicate fairness was however a counterbalance for the deficiencies just mentioned; and then the bust of the princess was superb beyond the cavil of an honest and impartial criticism. The bosoms were full, plump, well divided, and of stainless whiteness, — rich in the mature luxuriance of womanhood's grandest charm, but not protuberant enough to be pronounced matron-like. On the contrary, the whole aspect of the princess wore an air of virgin freshness and wholesome health which contrasted

favourably and strikingly with the appearance of some of the pale, sickly, and faded beauties of the English fashionable world, — beauties that "came out" at sixteen and lost all their bloom in the dissipation of four or five London winters, thus looking already old, and certainly *passée* at one and twenty. But here was this princess of four years older still, retaining all the first freshness of youth unimpaired, with a natural glow upon her cheeks, a willowy elasticity of form, and a complexion that was capable of standing the test of daylight after having been pronounced lovely in the gorgeous saloons flooded with lustre.

The princess was of middling stature, but of sufficient height for real womanly dignity. But in that stiffness and starchness which make courtiers and court ladies resemble animated statues, her Royal Highness was certainly deficient. All her motions and attitudes were accompanied with the unstudied grace so charmingly characteristic of childhood. The tutelage of a court master of the ceremonies and the lessons of the dancing-master were never apparent in the carriage, gait, and movements of Caroline of Brunswick. And in unison with this natural ease which thus adhered to her, and which rendered her manners as bewitching as her disposition was gay, her clear soft voice sounded harmoniously and joyously as the melody of a May morning when all nature is putting up its hymn of thanksgiving and exultation to the almighty Creator, that hymn which is conveyed in the song of the bird, the hum of the insect, the rustling of the leaves and the rippling of the silver stream.

Joyous in its sweet and expressive music was that voice, the accents of which imparted tenderness to her own sonorous native language, or set forth all the harmonious cadences of that charming French tongue in which she loved to shape and give utterance to her thoughts.

The figure of the princess was graceful and symmetrical. Her hands and feet were small, her ankles well turned. Though scrupulously cleanly and nice in her person, she detested the frippery of gorgeous apparel and delighted in plain attire. Having no ambition as a princess and no vanity as a woman, she remained as true to her own ingenuous, unsophisticated, and artless nature as the training she had experienced would permit. She was in all respects a true-hearted, well-meaning, and amiable creature, — one

who would have shone with all the decorations of domestic virtues had she been placed in a humbler sphere, and whom it was a sin and a cruelty to shackle with the ice-chains of courtly ceremony and restrain with the galling manacles of fashionable formalities. A cottage and not a throne should have been her portion; a worthy and unambitious man and not a prince should have been her partner in this life. In her nature were all the noblest elements of woman's character, in her disposition were all the most amiable features, and in her manners all the most endearing traits that can possibly adorn her sex.

Such was the Princess Caroline of Brunswick.

And now we find her decked out in the costliest apparel, with plumage waving over her brow and diamonds shining upon her hair, with the purest pearls around her still whiter neck and more stainless bosom, and attended by a courtier the prim stiffness and habitual starchness of whose appearance and manner constituted as it were an additional chain to imprison her mind within the sphere of cold formality and solemn ceremoniousness.

Nevertheless, though she felt ill at ease and was naturally in a flutter of suspense and anxiety to behold the man whom she was to receive as a husband, she could not restrain herself from conversing with the unaffected frankness that was habitual to her.

"I regret that your Royal Highness should not have been more favourably impressed with the manner and bearing of her most gracious Majesty," said the courtier, in comment upon one of the remarks which the princess had just made.

"Well, my dear Lord Malmesbury," exclaimed Caroline, with a smile of ill-subdued archness, "you will yourself admit the appearance of such a stately dame, so prim and awe-inspiring — "

"May it please your Royal Highness," interrupted the Earl of Malmesbury, with a slow, measured, and ceremonial bow, "I am bound to hint to your Royal Highness in the most respectful manner in the world, and yet with a profound seriousness, upon the inconvenience — I will not say impropriety — of applying the word dear to me. And however great the honour — "

"Oh, pray do not tease me now with a homily, my lord," cried the princess, somewhat pettishly. Then, immediately

afterward bursting into a merry laugh, she said in her joyous tones, "But where can the harm possibly be, since your lordship is quite old enough to be my father?"

"This observation in itself savours of an inconsiderateness which I should denominate rudeness on the part of any one save her Royal Highness," observed the Earl of Malmesbury, with another low and measured salutation.

"Are you offended, my lord?" asked Caroline, with an air of unfeigned concern. "If so, I implore your pardon, for I would not give you pain for all the world. You have been very good to me, bestowing upon me the best possible advice; and although I scarcely recollect at this moment a single point you have so strenuously laboured to impress upon me —"

"What! is it possible that I understand your Royal Highness correctly?" exclaimed the Earl of Malmesbury, lifting up his hands and raising his eyes in mingled horror and astonishment. "Now that your Royal Highness is touching upon the critical moment, that moment for which I so earnestly, anxiously, and honestly strove to prepare the mind of your Royal Highness —"

"Well, my dear Lord Malmesbury — my lord, I mean," cried the princess, hastily correcting herself, "suppose I assure you that I have retained in my memory all the valuable advice your lordship has given me, will that satisfy you?"

"I am afraid your Royal Highness would be insincere in making such a statement after the preceding avowal," said the courtier, with a deep gravity alike of tone and manner.

"I know that I am a giddy foolish creature at times, my good friend," proceeded the princess, in the same rattling chatterbox tone as before; "but you must pardon me if I frankly confess that you have altogether bewildered me with the numerous pieces of advice you have given me on different occasions. My memory is like a sieve in that respect. Heigho! I wish I was at Brunswick tying up my plants and feeding my birds."

"Your Royal Highness is guilty of a great indiscretion in expressing such a sentiment aloud, at the very moment when his Royal Highness may be approaching the door," said the earl, in a tone of solemn remonstrance.

"But if he does not hear me, there is no harm in saying what I think?" cried the princess, with a look so sweetly

deprecatory of the nobleman's displeasure that had he not been a heartless courtier — a mere automaton capable of only just so much mechanical action and feeling as form and ceremony allowed — he would have returned the kindest answer and in the most paternal spirit to the observation of that ingenuous, candid, and unsophisticated being.

"Your Royal Highness must only say what you think when it is consistent with the strict rules of etiquette," was the cold and worldly remark which struck upon the princess like an ice wind pouring into a warm room through a suddenly opened casement.

"But I presume I may think what I choose," said Caroline.

"It would be better not, your Royal Highness," responded the courtier.

"How! are not our thoughts our own in this country?" cried the princess in amazement.

"Assuredly not," answered the earl. "We must think as well as act according to fashion; nay, we must even look and move according to the same rigid rule, and as for our conversation — "

"Oh, then my father's court is actually more liberal than your vaunted English one," exclaimed the princess, on whose spirits a sudden damp had been thrown by this conversation.

"The court of his Majesty my gracious sovereign is the most particular, the best conducted, and the purest with regard to morals, in all the world," observed Lord Malmesbury, enunciating his opinions with as much dogmatic sententiousness as if he were proclaiming axioms.

"But with all those qualifications a terrible tyranny may be blended," said the princess; "and really your code of etiquette strikes me as being particularly severe. It converts human beings into mere machines."

"So they are in the presence of kings," observed the earl.

"It checks all the natural gush of pure and honest feelings," continued her Royal Highness.

"There must be no feeling save that of loyalty at court," said Malmesbury.

"It engenders selfishness and heartlessness," added Caroline.

"Hearts are not known within this sphere," rejoined the courtier.

"Upon my word, I begin to think you are quite correct,"

exclaimed her Royal Highness dryly, as she threw herself back in the chair and stretched out her feet toward the fire.

"May I humbly and respectfully observe," said the earl, "that the attitude which your Royal Highness has just assumed would not be pleasing to the prince were he to notice it."

"Why not?" demanded Caroline. "My feet are cold, and I warm them."

"But your Royal Highness must not have cold feet," replied Malmesbury.

"How on earth am I to prevent it?" exclaimed the princess, pettishly.

"I cannot say. All I can point out to your Royal Highness is that it is inconsistent with etiquette," was the dogmatic response.

"At every turn I am encountered by the word etiquette!" cried the princess.

"And your Royal Highness must never forget to measure every syllable you speak, every mouthful you eat, every step you take, every attitude you assume, every look you cast, and every letter you write, by the standard of etiquette.

"That is to say," observed Caroline, bitterly, "I am henceforth to look upon my existence as being confined to one abode of sensations, and even these I dare not conjure up for myself, but must take them as they are chosen for me. I have heard of the Roman vestals being immured in living tombs when they happened to go astray — "

"An unmarried lady should know nothing of women going astray," interrupted Lord Malmesbury, accompanying the objurgatory comment with the wonted grave salutation.

"But every lady who has arrived at years of discretion — whether married or unmarried — is aware that errors and faults of that kind do exist," exclaimed Caroline; "and it would be a wretched affectation to pretend ignorance on that point. For my part I never do."

"Your Royal Highness has too much candour in your disposition," said Malmesbury, with an accent of grave rebuke.

"Too much candour! But is not candour a virtue?"

"Assuredly, your Royal Highness. And yet — "

"Then how can I have too much of any virtue?"

"Virtues are often inconsistent with the etiquette of courts and high life," observed Malmesbury.

"But in proportion as we divest ourselves of virtues, we must naturally assume vices in their place," exclaimed the princess.

"The conventional laws of etiquette stamp vices as virtues in such cases," rejoined Malmesbury.

"Then, in a word, I am expected to throw off my natural skin and assume an artificial one altogether?" said Caroline.

"May I be permitted to observe that the allusion to your Royal Highness's — I really cannot repeat the word — savoured of indelicacy?" remarked the courtier, with many deprecatory bows and much shamefaced hesitation.

"Allusion to what, in Heaven's name?" demanded Caroline in perfect amazement. "Who made the allusion?"

"Your Royal Highness," was the response.

"And to what did I allude, then?"

"It is impossible — quite impossible — Oh, no, I could not think of repeating —"

"Then how am I to know another time?"

"True!" ejaculated Malmesbury. "And for that reason I must explain myself. Your Royal Highness spoke of your Royal Highness's — ahem! — your Royal Highness's — skin!"

And his lordship gave a great gasp, as if it were with an exhausting effort that he had brought himself to utter so dreadful a word; while the princess, after staring at him for nearly a minute in order to ascertain whether he could possibly be serious, threw herself back in her chair and yielded to a fit of such hearty laughter that the joyous peals might have been heard, and very likely were, in the adjacent rooms.

The Earl of Malmesbury was now perfectly aghast. This laughter was, in his estimation, most vulgar, most commonplace, most plebeian, most indecent. The prince might arrive at any moment; and what would he think of a royal lady who could still be as merry as a schoolgirl? The thing was altogether preposterous: it was intolerable, and Lord Malmesbury ventured to approach the princess and stand before her, making six or seven consecutive bows full of ominous meaning.

"Well, what is wrong now?" demanded the hilarious princess, with the tears running down those cheeks on which the usual bloom was now heightened into a perfect glow by the enthusiasm of her merriment. "What is wrong now, my lord?"

"That laughter, may it please your Royal Highness," was the response.

"What! would you have me laugh on the other side of my mouth?" exclaimed Caroline, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"Permit me to observe that the phrase 'Laugh on the other side of the mouth' is not by any means a pretty one," said the earl. "It savours of the nursery."

"Ah! would to Heaven I were yet there, and that I had never grown up to leave it!" exclaimed the princess, in a tone of deep feeling, as a presentiment of approaching evil suddenly struck like a chill to her heart. "But let us go back to the opening topic of our conversation," she said, after a few moments' profound pause. "You were asking me how I liked the reception which I experienced at the hands of the royal family. I will answer you frankly. The king was warm and cordial toward me; but there was something so singular in his look that I really fancied he was going crazy again."

"Your Royal Highness!" ejaculated Malmesbury, throwing up his arms in a perfect consternation. "It is almost as bad as treason to give utterance to such dreadful words."

"What! is the truth treason in England?" inquired the princess, with the most unaffected ingenuousness. "I thought that you Englishmen boasted of your freedom and your glorious Constitution; but I have not been many hours in your country without hearing quite enough to convince me that your vaunted liberty is all nonsense."

"May I beseech your Royal Highness?" exclaimed the earl, glancing with intense uneasiness toward the door.

"Suppose the prince did come in at this moment," said Caroline, "he would not be angry with me for expressing such an opinion as that which I have just enunciated. But I will return to the topic whence your interjected remonstrance led me aside. Well, then, the king received me warmly and cordially, the queen with a manner which might

have been stately courtesy, but which assuredly appeared to me to be a studied coldness. However, I care nothing at all for her or her humours — "

"Good heavens! your Royal Highness speaks thus of the queen?" ejaculated Malmesbury, turning up the whites of his eyes.

"And wherefore not?" demanded Caroline. "My aunt the princess-abbess one at Brunswick whispered in my ear that the Queen of England was known as 'Old Snuffy Charlotte.'"

"God forgive me for being the listener to such treason!" murmured the Earl of Malmesbury, his countenance now elongating to a degree which could not have been exceeded were he about to be hanged.

"As for the Princesses Sophia and Amelia," continued Caroline, without stopping to take much notice of the prim courtier's distress at her observations, "they are nice, unassuming, amiable young women, and I am certain we shall get on famously together. They are very handsome, too, and splendid figures; but both of them look as if they were married, or ought to be. They have a certain matronly air about them — "

"Such observations, may it please your Royal Highness, are decidedly improper," interrupted the Earl of Malmesbury.

"Nothing pleases your lordship," said Caroline, impatiently. "If the prince be only one-tenth as particular — But talking of the prince reminds me that I have not expressed my opinion of the Dukes of Cumberland and Clarence. The former looks like a murderous ruffian, and the latter like an idiot."

The Earl of Malmesbury was about to remonstrate for the hundredth time when a page entered, approached his lordship, whispered a few words, and immediately retired.

"Your Royal Highness," said the nobleman, "let me implore you to recollect all the good counsel wherewith I have at different times endeavoured to prepare you for the solemn moment that is now at hand."

"Then the prince has arrived?" said Caroline, her heart fluttering with expectation; and at the next moment she heaved a sigh as she thought of the young, the handsome, and the far-off Baron Bergami.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE MEETING

THE preceding conversation between Caroline of Brunswick and the Earl of Malmesbury, and which was carried on in the French language, has no doubt tended to throw some additional light upon the character of that amiable princess. A child of nature, art and artifice had not entirely weaned her from the habit of thinking and acting as nature prompted; and it has doubtless struck the reader that to an almost girlish candour and juvenile ingenuousness of disposition, she united a keen appreciation of right and wrong, an accurate discrimination between justice and injustice, and a power of separating the artificial from the real, the dross from the pure ore, in her estimation of individuals, of society, or of things. Her natural quickness at rejoinder and repartee made her a formidable antagonist against a person who had a bad argument to sustain; and the occasional freedoms of speech in which she indulged, and which can scarcely be called levities, must not be judged according to the English standard of etiquette and delicacy, but must be attributed to the greater license allowed by Continental manners and customs in that respect.

But we shall prefer the plan of suffering the true character of the Princess Caroline to develop itself gradually to the reader, in proportion as the narrative itself proceeds, rather than pause on this occasion to chronicle a lengthened commentary on the subject. We will therefore at once hasten to observe that scarcely had the deep-drawn sigh heaved to the memory of Baron Bergami escaped her lips, when the Prince of Wales entered the apartment.

Caroline instantaneously rose from her chair and advanced to meet her intended husband.

Rapid was the glance which each threw at the other, with a mutual curiosity, eager and intense on either side, to know the best or the worst that was to be gleaned in that first transitory survey.

Simultaneously as their looks met, so did they fall for an instant. Then they encountered each other again, and this time the eyes of the princess were cast down beneath the bolder, and stronger, and more searching scrutiny that her intended husband now bestowed upon her.

The prince went thither already so complete a prey to prejudice, that had he found in the princess an angel of perfection, his imagination would have prompted him to behold Heaven's own radiance through the dingy medium of earth's grossest atmosphere. It was not that he had merely been assured that she was not beautiful; but pains had been systematically taken to render her an object of loathing, abhorrence, and disgust in respect to those very points on which he was known to be most particular. Thus, although at the very first glance he saw enough to convince him that she was not quite so repulsive as he had been led to suppose, yet the inveteracy of preconceived impressions would not allow him to behold sufficient to afford him any pleasing surprise or agreeable disappointment.

On the side of the prince, therefore, it was a very bad opinion slightly improved by the first survey; but on that of the princess it was a very good opinion much moderated by the same result. He had expected to find her a disgusting creature, whereas he could not help acknowledging at the first glance that the portraiture had been overcoloured; she had expected to encounter the very personification of all masculine beauty, dignity, grace, affability, and fascination, whereas she could not help thinking that her future husband was somewhat stout, that his countenance had a drunken-looking flush, and that he was by no means the exquisite Adonis public report, private letters, and his own portrait had represented him.

Thus, within the first minute of their encounter, and before a single word was exchanged, the princess rose a few degrees in the estimate of the prince, while he fell proportionately in her judgment.

But scarcely had those glances been exchanged, — glances which engendered impressions, or rather altered

and modified preconceived ones, with the rapidity which thought alone can achieve, — scarcely had the royal couple found themselves standing face to face, when the Earl of Malmesbury ceremoniously introduced them to each other.

Then the princess, in obedience to a hint previously given by that noble oracle of courtly etiquette, knelt down at the feet of her intended husband; while the latter, actuated by the observances of the same conventional code, hastened to raise her and touch her forehead with his lips. But scarcely had he performed this ceremony when he turned rudely, brutally, and even savagely away; and, dragging Malmesbury aside, hastily whispered, " I am altogether overcome. She is not a fit wife for me. Get me a glass of brandy, or I shall be ill."

" Permit me to remind your Royal Highness," said the grave, solemn, and sententious Malmesbury, " that the rules of etiquette make no mention of brandy on such an occasion as the present."

" Damn the rules of etiquette!" ejaculated the prince, brutally. " I will go to the queen and tell her that I'll sooner forfeit my right to the crown than take that German slut as my wife."

And with these words the heir apparent to the British throne — the first gentleman in Europe — flung himself out of the room, banging the door violently behind him.

Utterly discomfited, the Earl of Malmesbury staggered against the wall, perfectly aghast at the extraordinary scene which had just taken place, and with all his notions relative to court etiquette thrown into such a complete jumble that if anybody had asked him at the moment whether it was proper to stand upon one's head or one's heels in the king's presence, he would have been totally incompetent to solve the difficulty.

The interview between the Prince of Wales and Caroline of Brunswick had lasted exactly three minutes; and on seeing him depart in the precipitate manner just mentioned, the princess was for a few moments a prey to the deepest indignation. Her pride was wounded, and she felt as if a cruel outrage had been perpetrated against her. But her natural kindness of disposition and good humour speedily came to her aid; and, accosting Lord Malmesbury with a smile,

she said, "Was it in pursuance of your English rules of etiquette that his Royal Highness fled so abruptly?"

"Ah! pardon him, royal lady," exclaimed the nobleman, who. being recalled to himself by that very pertinent question, suddenly perceived the absolute necessity of giving some gloss to the brutal rudeness of the prince. "It was natural that his Royal Highness should be deeply moved on such an occasion."

"But methought I heard him give vent to the favourite oath of you Englishmen," observed Caroline, with a look of increasing good humour. "Was it not so?"

"God forbid!" ejaculated the earl, unhesitatingly giving utterance to an impudent falsehood. "His Royal Highness could not possibly be guilty of such an unpardonable breach of courtesy. At the dinner-table presently he will shine to that advantage which will win the affections as well as secure the admiration of your Royal Highness. As to his personal appearance, I need scarcely ask your Royal Highness whether you are well pleased —"

"Oh, indeed, he is much fatter than I expected to find him," exclaimed the princess, speaking out her real sentiments as freely, boldly, and ingenuously as she would have passed an opinion upon a picture, "and I must likewise observe that he has a somewhat dissipated look."

"Such remarks, may it please your Royal Highness," said Lord Malmesbury, gravely, "are quite out of place."

"Then why did you question me upon the subject?" demanded the princess, surveying the courtier with surprise and mistrust, for she began to think that there was a great deal of cold selfishness in his doctrines and insincerity in his conduct.

"According to the routine of courts, there are set answers to set questions," replied his lordship.

"Such is not altogether the case at my father's court," observed the princess, with a sigh; and she wished that she was safe back again in Brunswick.

The discourse between herself and Lord Malmesbury was now interrupted by the entrance of Lady Jersey, Mrs. Harcourt, and Mrs. Harvey Aston, who conducted the princess to the apartments prepared for her temporary accommodation in St. James's Palace.

While submitting to the process of the dinner toilet,

Caroline chatted familiarly with the three ladies; and to the Countess of Jersey she was especially polite and amiable. Mrs. Harcourt, the bedchamber woman, was a middle-aged person, very servile and very garrulous; Lady Jersey has already been described; and it only remains for us to observe that Mrs. Harvey Aston was a very handsome woman, about four and thirty years of age, and one of the prince's numerous mistresses. Thus two of the royal voluptuary's paramours were installed in close intimacy about the person of the princess who in three days was to become his wife.

When the dinner toilet was nearly concluded, Caroline suddenly observed, "By the bye, my dear Jersey, do you know wherefore I have taken such an amazing fancy to you?"

"I am at a loss to conceive what humble merit on my part should have won me the honour of your Royal Highness's favour," was the response delivered by the countess in the usual sycophantic style of courtly phraseology.

"Your fame reached my ears in Germany," continued the princess; "and rumour declared that you were not only a very handsome woman, but also one of the prince's best friends."

"Indeed!" ejaculated the countess, the warm red blood boiling scarlet up to the very surface of her beautiful polished skin of delicate olive; and, affecting to be busied at the toilet-table she turned aside to conceal her confusion.

"Yes, such were the rumours which reached my ears," proceeded Caroline, in her wonted good-humoured, inconsiderate manner, and without the slightest intention to produce any excitement either in a bad or good sense; "and though, to tell you the candid truth, I can pretty well guess the meaning of your great friendship with the prince, I am not angry now, nor shall I be jealous hereafter. I am not such an idiot as to suppose that a man, with such advantages and opportunities, will prove a saint; and I have made up my mind not to vex him in any way. You may therefore tell him, my dear Jersey, the first time you happen to be alone with him, — which I dare say will be tolerably soon," added her Royal Highness, laughing heartily, — "you may assure him, I say, that so far from being jealous of you, I at once treated you with marked cordiality and signalled you as one of my best friends."

"Is this sarcasm, wit, or pure stolidity?" demanded Lady Jersey, in a hasty whisper, of Mrs. Harvey Aston, as they stood together at the toilet-table.

"Pure stolidity, utter folly, girlish nonsense," was the reply given in an equally prompt manner and low tone. "She is a complete fool."

"A downright idiot," responded the Countess of Jersey. Then, turning toward the princess, she said aloud, "I thank your Royal Highness for the promise of friendship so graciously made me; but I cannot undertake to become the bearer of any verbal messages to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales."

"Well, then, I will take an opportunity of putting him at his ease with respect to yourself," said Caroline, in her wonted offhand manner of honest sincerity, in which, however, there was nothing coarse and nothing vulgar.

The toilet was complete, and the princess, attended by the three ladies, repaired to the banqueting-room. The king received her with marked kindness, the queen, who was a thoroughly heartless woman, with as studied a reserve. The Princesses Sophia, Amelia, and Augusta were present on the occasion, and treated Caroline of Brunswick with the utmost tenderness and consideration. They observed the ill-natured coldness of demeanour assumed by their mother; and they endeavoured to atone for that scandalous inhospitality and cold-blooded cruelty by the warmth of their own attentions. The Duke of Clarence was good-naturedly soft and harmlessly foolish, — as he always showed himself, — for he was scarcely two removes from an idiot; while the Duke of Cumberland, whose countenance expressed all the darkest passions of the human soul, endeavoured to render himself agreeable, but was viewed by the Princess of Brunswick with emotions of mingled terror and suspicion.

And how did the Prince of Wales comport himself upon this occasion? As a matter of course he sat next to his intended bride; and, for common decency's sake, he was civil and attentive to her, but no more. There was naught of cordiality in his manner; and as for love, that was out of the question. Nevertheless, he watched her with an eager curiosity, and listened with a deep attention to every word she uttered. For he felt that his honour was involved, or at all events his pride was concerned, in the qualifications and

attributes of the woman who was to become his wife. Thus was he upon this occasion more inclined to study her impartially and judge her honestly than during the three minutes they were together ere now.

He saw and could not help acknowledging within himself that if she were even the devil, she had been painted much blacker than she really was. Her teeth were sound and good, as fine as those which adorned any of the prince's most cherished mistresses; her hair was of a pure auburn, silken, luxuriant, and glossy; and her bust was evidently superb. Thus far the account was in favour of the princess. But on the other hand the poison of prejudice and the venom of malignant bias had been so deeply instilled into the heart, soul, and senses of the prince, that he viewed all her little amiabilities as failings, all her peculiarities as faults, and all her inexperiences as downright vulgarities. Her good humour he took for familiarity, her hilarity for coarseness, her cheerfulness for unmannerly forwardness. In that natural generosity which made her treat her lady dependents as equals instead of inferiors, and prompted her to elevate them to the rank of her friends, the prince beheld a most heinous departure from the usages of courts; and in every display of nature's pure, honest, and unadulterated feeling on the part of her Royal Highness her intended husband would persist in seeing naught save the most unpardonable solecisms with regard to etiquette. But no pen can depict his horror, amazement, and disgust, when the well-meaning and artless Caroline seized an opportunity to whisper in his ear the promised communication relative to the Countess of Jersey.

The fact was that her Royal Highness had been overtutored by Malmesbury. One of his lessons was that if she ever became aware of any of the prince's intrigues, she must be cautious not to exhibit the slightest jealousy; and thus the inexperienced princess was now hurried by her good intentions into the calamitous fault of proclaiming to the prince in words that forbearance which, if she were disposed to show it at all, should only have been displayed in conduct. And the prince himself was too narrow-minded in his genteel fastidiousness to understand or appreciate the generous purpose which his intended wife entertained, and too deeply prejudiced against her to pardon the bungling fashion into which her very innocence and inexperience hurried her

when desirous of manifesting that purpose. The incident, therefore, only tended to enhance his disgust at her manners, conduct, and style of conversation; and these deepening impressions of disfavour were by no means counterbalanced by the improved opinion he was compelled to form in respect to her personal appearance. He drank copiously to drown thought; and the princess, with her natural quickness perceiving that he was addicted to the bottle, found herself rapidly becoming more and more disenchanted with regard to the first gentleman and most polished prince in Europe.

The dinner was over, the guests were retiring, Caroline of Brunswick had withdrawn to her own apartments, and at length the Prince of Wales found an opportunity of speaking a few words in private to his royal mother. Conducting the queen to the farther end of the superb saloon where the evening had been passed, he said in a low, deep tone, "Your Majesty can now express an opinion upon the princess."

"George, I am sick at heart, no, that is not the feeling," exclaimed Queen Charlotte, with a concentrated bitterness in her accent and an almost fiendlike expression in her looks; "but I am devoured with rage and indignation to think that you should be thus sacrificed. It is all your father's doing, and you know he is as obstinate as Satan himself. I warned him against this alliance, I implored, I threatened; but all was unavailing, and now my worst fears are confirmed. Caroline is not a fit wife for you, and the marriage will be an unhappy one."

"Why did not your Majesty warn, implore, and threaten me, instead of my father?" demanded the prince, his words and looks both expressing the bitterest sarcasm. "Methinks that I was the principal person to whom you should have deigned the revelation of your real sentiments; but I never even knew that your Majesty had objected to this match until this evening."

"And who told you so, George?" exclaimed the queen.

"Your manner toward the princess made me suspect it," was the answer; "and Lady Jersey confirmed the fact."

"Yes, Lady Jersey and myself had a few minutes' conversation together after dinner," observed the queen, looking her son very hard in the face, as if to ascertain how much the countess had really told him. Then, perceiving a sardonic smile beginning to wreathe the prince's lips, she said, hastily,

"But I suppose that whatever I did state to Lady Jersey will be made known to you within an hour or two, and therefore I may as well give you the explanation myself. I told her, then," added Queen Charlotte, a sinister gloom lowering over her harsh and disagreeable features, while her voice sank at the same time to the lowest possible whisper, "I told Lady Jersey that henceforth I would be her friend if she would continue to be your friend. And more than that, I assured her that when the storm should come — that storm which is inevitable — I would take her part and your part, whatever may betide."

"Ah! then your Majesty already anticipates a domestic convulsion at Carlton House?" said the prince, still with a concentrated bitterness in his tone; "and you are preparing in time for the part you shall play when my wife and I go to loggerheads? That is the plain English of it, and much plainer English indeed than I am usually accustomed to speak."

"Put what construction you please upon my conduct, George," observed the queen, after a few moments' consideration; "but let one thing at least be engraven on your memory, and let it serve as a text for all your self-communings at a future day."

"And that one thing?" demanded the prince, surveying his royal mother with mingled interest and curiosity. "What is it?"

"That in me the Princess Caroline has a bitter and an unforgiving enemy," rejoined the queen, the words hissing snakelike through the lips that were white and quivering.

Bad and unprincipled as was the heir apparent, heartless, cruel, and selfish as his disposition might be, he was nevertheless struck with a species of horror at this cold-blooded announcement on the part of his mother. A man may be a murderer himself, and can yet think well of human nature generally; but if he suddenly finds out that his own mother is a murderess — the being who possesses the prestige of all-excelling goodness in his eyes — his confidence in everything human is annihilated in an instant. Thus was it with the Prince of Wales. His own mother had suddenly thrown off the mask and revealed herself to him as a fiend in female shape; and he gazed upon her in mingled horror, wonderment, and distress.

But she darted upon him a look full of contempt as much as to imply that even yet he did not half-comprehend the true meaning of the words to which she had given utterance; then, quitting him abruptly, she retired for the night.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE DISGUISED ONE

We must now return to the Countess of Desborough and Miss Plantagenet, who quitted the sponging-house together in the manner already described. The carriage which had brought Eleanor and the Duchess of Devonshire to Chancery Lane belonged to the former. She and Miss Plantagenet accordingly entered the vehicle, which drove rapidly away toward the West End.

"Whither can I have the pleasure of taking you?" inquired the countess, when she and her young companion were ensconced side by side in the luxurious carriage.

"Do not allow any consideration on my account to interfere with your ladyship's arrangements," said Miss Plantagenet.

"I have no arrangements fixed for this morning, unless indeed it be to call in the Edgware Road," observed the countess. "It is somewhat early to pay such a visit; but as I am very intimate with the lady to whose residence I am about to proceed, the time of day matters little. If you feel disposed to accompany me, Miss Plantagenet, I shall be glad of your society, and the carriage will then be at your service to take you to your own abode."

"I shall experience much pleasure in accompanying your ladyship," replied Miss Plantagenet.

The Countess of Desborough accordingly pulled the check-string and ordered the coachman to drive to Bellenden Priory, Edgeware Road. The vehicle rolled rapidly along; and, during the half-hour which elapsed ere it stopped, Eleanor and her young companion conversed upon those general topics which could alone engage the attention of two persons who were almost strangers to each other. But

though thus strangers, yet a certain degree of cordiality, if not of positive intimacy, at once sprang up between the countess and Miss Plantagenet; inasmuch as the former looked upon the latter as the cousin of her own dearest and best friend, the Duchess of Devonshire.

Presently the carriage stopped at Bellenden Priory; and while the footman dismounted from behind the vehicle and rang the bell at the gate, Miss Plantagenet surveyed the large rambling edifice with some degree of attention from the window of the vehicle.

"It is a strange old building," remarked the countess; "but very handsomely fitted up within. Have you ever been here before?"

"Never," replied Miss Plantagenet. "I have, however, heard a great deal relative to the Marchioness of Bellenden and her lawsuit with the Montgomery family. But I have never seen her ladyship, at least, not to my knowledge —"

"You will find her an amiable, unassuming, kind-hearted woman," observed the Countess of Desborough. "She lives in a comparatively strict seclusion; but my husband and myself are amongst the few friends who enjoy her intimacy."

At this moment the garden gate was opened by a porter in plain livery; and the Countess of Desborough alighted from the carriage, followed by Miss Plantagenet. Traversing the garden, which was laid out in a beautifully picturesque style, they reached the front entrance, ascended the marble steps, and were conducted by the domestic into a spacious hall surrounded by suits of armour, antique vases, and statues. A splendid staircase, with oaken balusters magnificently carved, led to a landing ornamented with porcelain jars filled with curious artificial flowers; and thence opened the drawing-room into which the Countess of Desborough and Miss Plantagenet were shown.

The Marchioness of Bellenden, who was alone in the apartment when the visitresses were announced, rose from the sofa and hastened forward to welcome Lady Desborough in the kindest manner; but the instant that she threw her eyes upon Miss Plantagenet, she started visibly, then bowed hastily and distantly, and, turning abruptly away, conducted the countess to a seat.

Eleanor did not observe this little excitement — or rather transitory flurry — on the part of the marchioness; but Miss

Plantagenet did, and was evidently much surprised thereat. Indeed, as this mysterious young lady took a seat of her own accord, she murmured to herself, "The marchioness cannot possibly suspect who I am, for I never saw her before in all my life, to my knowledge; and it is scarcely probable that she should know me."

"I really quite forgot to introduce my young friend to you, Laura," exclaimed the Countess of Desborough; "but you will pardon the oversight, which was occasioned by the pleasure I experienced in seeing you after some weeks' separation. Miss Plantagenet, a cousin of the Duchess of Devonshire — "

"Miss Plantagenet is welcome as your friend, Eleanor," said the Marchioness of Bellenden, in whose tone and manner there was evidently something which implied mistrust or suspicion, or else pure annoyance at the introduction of a stranger to the priory; but immediately subduing the sentiment, whatever it were, her ladyship threw upon Miss Plantagenet a benignant smile, observing, "You are welcome to the priory; and if I did not give you that assurance the moment you entered the room, it was because the almost recluse-like retirement in which I live renders me slow in greeting newcomers until I learn who they are."

Miss Plantagenet gave a graceful inclination of the head in acknowledgment of these explanatory remarks; and the Marchioness of Bellenden, turning toward Lady Desborough, said, "I have not seen you since Stamford Manor came into your possession. How do you like your new property?"

"Very much, so far as the house and grounds are concerned," replied the countess; "but the associations are gloomy and dispiriting. You must remember that it was within those walls the unfortunate and guilty Lady Stamford put a period to her own existence — "

"Oh, but you possess too strong a mind, Eleanor," exclaimed the marchioness, "to be influenced by superstitious terrors."

"Still there are feelings of horror and dread which will grow upon us at times, even if we put no faith in apparitions," observed the countess. "But generally speaking, both the earl and myself are well pleased with our new estate. And now tell me, dear Laura, how progresses your own lawsuit, and

likewise that affair of the deserving young artist, Mr. George Woodfall — "

"Not a word upon either subject at present, not a syllable!" exclaimed the Marchioness of Bellenden, with an excitement which evidently amazed the Countess of Desborough as being something so unusual on the part of one whose habitual manner was so serene, tranquil, and benignant.

"You cannot fancy, my dear Laura," observed the countess, "that Miss Plantagenet is either interested in the topics which I ventured to broach, or capable of repeating elsewhere anything that we may say confidentially here."

"I impute nothing whatever to your friend, Eleanor," said the marchioness, in a tone of decision; "but surely the matters to which you alluded can have no possible interest for Miss Plantagenet, and therefore to discuss them would be to exclude her from the conversation altogether."

"I yield to your wishes, Laura," observed the countess.

"When did you come up to town?" inquired Lady Bellenden.

"Last evening," was the response. "And on my arrival in Berkeley Square I was much distressed to learn that my friend Mrs. Fitzherbert was involved in the most cruel embarrassments. Indeed, to tell you the truth, she had been arrested for debt, and was in a dreadful place which is called a lockup house. Accordingly, the first thing this morning I hastened to Devonshire House; and her Grace instantaneously consented to accompany me to Chancery Lane, where poor Mrs. Fitzherbert was imprisoned. On our arrival there, we found Miss Plantagenet and a certain Lady Lade, a somewhat notorious character whom I was not overwell pleased to encounter — "

"I have already assured your ladyship that she is no friend of mine," observed Miss Plantagenet, doubtless entertaining fears for her own reputation after having been found in such questionable society. "She was already at that place when I crossed its threshold last night."

"Ah! then you slept there, Miss Plantagenet?" said the Marchioness of Bellenden, interrogatively. "Were you not alarmed at passing the night in a species of prison? for such must be the character of the house alluded to."

"The three ladies were all together in one room," observed

the Countess of Desborough; "and I suppose they considered themselves collective and mutual protection. At all events you were not disturbed in the night, I believe?" added Eleanor, turning toward Miss Plantagenet.

"Not in the slightest degree," was the answer.

"Perhaps Miss Plantagenet had a bed to herself and slept soundly," said the Marchioness of Bellenden.

"Miss Plantagenet, on the contrary, was Mrs. Fitzherbert's companion," remarked the Countess of Desborough. "But really our conversation has turned upon the most trivial and ridiculous details; and I shall therefore hasten to inform you, Laura, that having called at the lockup house, I was frightened away by the sudden arrival of the prince. Miss Plantagenet was as unwilling to meet his Royal Highness as I was; and we therefore hurried off together. Then I proposed the visit to Bellenden Priory, and now I have given a full and complete account of myself."

"You will remain and pass the day with me, Eleanor?" said the marchioness, who did not, however, give the invitation with that cordiality which claimed a prompt acceptance and forbade a refusal.

"Not on the present occasion," returned the countess. "The earl is in town, and I promised to accompany him in the afternoon to pay several visits. Moreover, I am afraid that I have already disturbed you, or interfered with some arrangements —"

"Far from it," interrupted the marchioness. "You are unkind to make such an observation, Eleanor, since you know that I have not a dearer friend in the world than yourself. But you must come and see me again to-morrow, or next day, and then we will have a long discourse together."

"Be it so," said the countess. "By the way, what has become of that beautiful girl whom I saw here the last time I called?"

"She is still residing with me," answered Lady Bellenden, with a rapid glance of uneasiness at Miss Plantagenet as she spoke. "A more amiable, virtuous, kind-hearted creature never breathed than my young protegée; and were she my own daughter, I could not love her more devotedly than I do. She has endured much sorrow — much persecution likewise —"

"You told me the chief details of her narrative when I was last here," observed the Countess of Desborough. "Poor girl, she is not the only one whom the Prince of Wales has sought to ensnare; but she is one of the very few who have had the courage to resist, and the happiness to escape him."

While the two ladies were thus discoursing, Miss Plantagenet indulged in a tolerably searching survey of the marchioness. Indeed, whenever Lady Bellenden was not looking toward her, Miss Plantagenet was devouring her with an ardour somewhat remarkable in a modest and well-behaved young female.

We have stated in a previous chapter that the marchioness was now about thirty-seven years of age and that she was very handsome. The garb of widowhood which she wore set off her dazzling complexion to the utmost advantage, and enhanced the soft serenity of expression which usually sat upon her countenance. Her dark chestnut hair, glossy as velvet, appeared in bands beneath the border of the snowy cap which seemed to become her as entirely and completely as if it were in sooth a coquettish appropriation of a peculiar article of vesture to a particular style of beauty. Between the vermilion freshness of the lips the teeth showed white as ivory; the hands were delicately fair and admirably modelled; and feet, long but narrow, peeped forth from the skirt of the mourning drapery.

Although the high corsage of the dress completely concealed the bosom, and the arms were imprisoned in their long sleeves, yet was it impossible for even the most inert imagination to do otherwise than depict unto itself the contours of the bust and the symmetry of the arms. Nor less would the admirer of the fair sex have been forced to admit that this general concealment of her rich and glowing beauties only rendered the Marchioness of Bellenden more indescribably charming and enhanced ten thousand times the sensual and seductive power which so splendid a woman must under any circumstances have possessed.

But while Miss Plantagenet was wondering within herself whether the marchioness entertained any suspicion regarding her, or whether the little peculiarities in her behaviour were traceable only to a natural prudence and reserve in speaking too freely before strangers, while Miss Plantagenet was thus

deliberating, we say, the door opened and Rose Foster entered the apartment.

"My dear girl," exclaimed the Countess of Desborough, hastening forward to meet her with a generous enthusiasm, "I was just making the kindest inquiries concerning you. Allow me to introduce my friend Miss Plan—"

"Oh, what means this masquerading?" cried Rose Foster, with an ejaculation of mingled surprise and alarm, as her looks encountered those of the false Miss Plantagenet. Then, instantaneously recollecting certain past incidents, she flew frantically toward the Marchioness of Bellenden, exclaiming, "Save me, dear lady, save me from that nobleman in disguise! He is one of the patrons of the infamous Mrs. Brace, and it can be for no good purpose that Lord Florimel thus disguised—"

"Lord Florimel!" ejaculated the Countess of Desborough, a light breaking in upon her, and the whole deception flashing to her mind in a moment.

But the young nobleman — for he indeed it was — had no disposition to remain and face three angry, outraged women. In Rose Foster he had instantaneously recognized that same Camilla Morton whom Mrs. Brace had once offered to sell unto his arms; and the moment she gave vent to the ejaculatory remarks which showed that the recognition was mutual and that his exposure was imminent, he prepared for a hurried retreat. No sooner, therefore, was his name flung forth from the lips of the terrified and astonished girl, than he sprang to the door, threw it open, and rushed toward the stairs. But his foot caught in a mat, he fell heavily, and his forehead came in contact with one of the porcelain vases that adorned the landing.

He heard and saw no more; consciousness had abandoned him!

When Lord Florimel slowly returned to himself, awaking gradually from the deep trance in which he had been plunged, he found himself lying in bed, but enveloped with a darkness as black as that of a sepulchre. A stupendous silence likewise entombed him; and while no gleam of light reached the eye, no footstep nor voice met the ear.

By degrees his ideas began to settle themselves in the proper departments of the brain; and when he recalled to

mind everything that had taken place at the sponging-house, next his ride in the carriage along with Lady Desborough, and lastly, his visit to Bellenden Priory, he raised his hand to his brow to steady the recollections which were rolling in upon his bewildered and attenuated brain. But, ah! was it a bandage which his fingers encountered? A bandage around his head? Yes, and now he remembered that he had fallen in his endeavour to fly from the priory.

Where was he at present, then? In his own house? No; for on stretching out his arms, he grasped curtains with fringes quite different from any that belonged to the fittings of his own mansion. Was he, then, at the priory? It was scarcely probable Lady Bellenden would have suffered him to remain there, if it were at all possible to have removed him without endangering his life.

But while he was yet tossing as it were upon the turmoil of his bewildering reflections, a clock began to chime.

Heavens! what a thrill of mingled amazement, ecstasy, and suspense ran through his entire form, as the notes of those musical bells struck upon his ear. For he had heard them before, — oh, he was convinced he had heard them before, — heard them under circumstances, too, the mere reminiscence of which made his whole being glow with rapture, despite of the condition of exhaustion into the consciousness of which he had just awoke.

The chimes ceased, and all was profoundly still again.

Then raising himself up in the couch, Florimel ascertained with his hands its position in respect to the wall; and afterward he thrust forth his arms to feel for a particular object near the bed's head. Yes, it was there, it encountered his touch, — that large armchair in which he had deposited his clothes on a certain occasion.

More agitated grew his feelings, but with a blissful and ecstatic emotion, as he pursued his researches. Descending cautiously from the couch, for he felt that he was so weak as to be scarcely able to sustain himself upon his limbs, he felt for the table, and then he groped about for the sofa. And he found them, — yes, he found them in precisely the position which he had expected, each in the spot which he had so accurately foreknown.

Overcome by the gush of joyous memories and the still more delicious hopes which now sped through his brain, he

sank down upon that sofa; and there he lay for a few minutes, not so much to collect his thoughts as to indulge in the deep luxuriousness which they were rapidly assuming.

Silence and darkness still environed him; but he perceived that the atmosphere was pleasantly warm and delicately perfumed. Suddenly the idea flashed to his mind that the key to the reading of the great secret was at this moment in his possession; in a word, that he need only use his hands and his eyes for a moment to ascertain where he was. For that this was the boudoir of love and of mystery he had already obtained the conviction. But where was it situated? To what mansion did it belong? And in what part of London might it be?

Rising from the sofa, Lord Florimel felt his way to the window. The curtains were of thick velvet, and were not only closely drawn, but likewise fastened down the middle with large buttons. He opened them, and his hands now encountered the shutters. These were secured with a massive iron bar running all across, and fixed with a padlock. The key of this padlock was not there; the shutters were therefore immovable, and not even a single chink nor joint was wide enough to admit a gleam from without, even though it were broad midday. But whether it were morning, noon, or night, Florimel was utterly unable to determine.

Quitting the casement, the young nobleman felt his way to the door. He had not the slightest hope of finding it unlocked; and the result was as he had expected. It was well secured, and so firm in its framework that his hand could not shake it.

Returning to the sofa, he resumed his reclining posture upon it, murmuring to himself, "Well, at all events, if I am a prisoner, the gaol where I am confined is one fraught with the most pleasing reminiscences and the most delicious hopes. But I would that my fair gaoler were here with me, the more so, inasmuch as I begin to feel famished for want of food."

"Think you, dear Florimel, that I should neglect you?" whispered the soft, dulcet, and never-to-be-forgotten voice of the Unknown Lady; and the next instant the young nobleman was clasped in her arms.

One long delicious kiss — a kiss sustained for upwards of a minute by mouth glued to mouth — sent a burning thrill

through the forms of the paramours thus reunited; and then the lady, reaching some delicate refreshments from the table, made Florimel partake thereof as he lay half-reclining in her arms, and with his head pillowed upon her glowing, naked bosom.

"Tell me, my charming friend," he said, "how long have I been unwell, — hours or days? For I am utterly ignorant on that head."

"This is the third day after the accident," murmured the Unknown. "It is the 8th of April, and it is now about seven in the evening. But how you came here, how happens it that I am your nurse — "

"Then I am not at Bellenden Priory?" said Florimel, hastily.

"Can you think it possible?" demanded the Unknown. "But you must not talk too much now, nor must I engage your attention too long. You have been delirious, and the doctor has given you opiates. In a few moments you must return to your couch, and endeavour to enjoy a sound, refreshing sleep. Then to-morrow morning you will awake convalescent; and I shall be enabled to give you such explanations as you require."

"Be it as you say, my charming nurse," cried Florimel, bestowing a warm kiss upon the breast that had just served as his pillow.

He now returned to bed; and when he was once more ensconced in the luxurious couch, the Unknown seated herself in the armchair by the side; and, with one of his hands clasped in her own, she seemed anxious and ready to perform all the duties of a good nurse and afford all the tender ministrations of a loving woman.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE MARRIAGE

We are now about to enter upon one of the most important and interesting episodes of our narrative, — an episode which is marked with a date constituting a fatal era in the lives of two individuals. Yes, fatal to the honour of the vile prince who swore to love a woman whom he had almost previously made up his mind to hate, and fatal to the unhappy, amiable, and excellent princess whom circumstances made the sacrifice to expediency and the victim of a cold-blooded, heartless, and cowardly tyrant.

It was in the evening of the 8th of April, 1795, that the marriage between their Royal Highnesses the Prince of Wales and Caroline of Brunswick was celebrated at the royal chapel, in St. James's Palace. The king, the queen, and all the royal family were present, — save and except the Duke of York; for this cowardly and incompetent braggart was absent on the Continent, where he was leading the British troops into all kinds of disaster, defeat, and disgrace.

We need hardly say that the bridal ceremony was characterized by all the pomp, ostentation, and splendour which the British court had ever kept up at the expense of the crushed, wronged, and plundered people. The queen was bedizened with diamonds, while her nostrils were black with snuff; and the precious stones which gemmed the ostrich plumes and shone upon the brows, and necks, and bosoms, and arms of the princesses and other ladies present might have paid off a handsome instalment of the national debt.

The king wore upon his countenance that stolid smile of satisfaction which was peculiar to him; the queen was stern in her studied composure and severe in her prim stateliness. The Princess Amelia surveyed Caroline of Brunswick with a

melancholy interest; for the royal daughter of England doubtless presaged full well the destiny of her unhappy and as yet unsuspecting cousin.

And Caroline herself, how did she appear upon this solemn and memorable occasion? Nothing could be more touchingly amiable than her demeanour — nothing more winning than her whole aspect. Upon her countenance there was the habitual smile, but beaming faintly though not altogether subdued, yet mingling with an expression which showed that she felt all the awe-inspiring associations of the ceremony, and that she resigned herself placidly and docilely to the path which had been prepared for her by others and which was not the one of her own choosing. There was also in her look a holy reliance upon the will of the Supreme Being, as the chief arbiter of those destinies which the machinery of man put into motion, but which He could control at any moment.

And the prince, how appeared he then and there? With a countenance flushed by drinking, and with eyes that swam vacantly in a bacchanalian mist, did he attend at the altar. His licentious looks lingered devouringly upon the much-exposed charms of the Countess of Jersey and Mrs. Harvey Aston; and he even had the hardihood to bestow a significant smile upon the former, — a token of regard which the infamous woman did not fail to greet with a triumphant expression of countenance, and reward with the sweetest wreathing of her red lips.

The Princess Caroline beheld these barefaced signs of intelligence between the man who in five minutes would be her husband and the woman who was already her too successful rival; and though for an instant the warm blood rushed to the countenance of the poor victim, and she experienced a sad tightening at the heart, yet at the next moment she recovered all her self-possession through the aid of her divine temper, her enduring disposition, and her studied resolve to meet with resignation whatever might be in store for her.

And now the ceremony commenced. The Archbishop of Canterbury officiated, and the king himself gave the bride away. As the solemnity progressed, the pious resignation of the princess deepened into a dejection against which she could not combat; while the heir apparent became irritable

and impatient. Suddenly he perceived a tear — a pearly tear — fall from the countenance of the princess on the edge of the velvet cushion whereon she knelt; and, instead of being softened by that touching proof of true feminine feelings, the prince suffered, nay, even forced his imagination to seize upon the circumstance as a motive for self-annoyance. He reasoned within his own breast that Caroline ought to be too happy, too proud, and too grateful at becoming his wife, to be enabled to shed a tear; and he looked on that pure tribute of an artless woman's respect and love for the home and parents she had quitted, perhaps for ever, he looked upon that diamond yielded up from a mine of feelings unfathomable to eyes whose powers of vision were restricted by the grossest worldly selfishness, he looked upon that tear, we say, as an insult to himself.

The torture which he thus chose to inflict upon his own soul goaded him to the quick; and he sprang abruptly from his kneeling position. The archbishop stopped short in the midst of one of the most solemn and impressive portions of the ceremony, and all eyes were turned upon the prince. A sickening feeling seized on the Princess of Brunswick; a consternation fell on most of the others present; but an infernal delight sprang up in the hearts of the queen, Lady Jersey, and Mrs. Harvey Aston. As for Lord Malmesbury, he was struck with dismay; and all his notions of etiquette were thrown into the most lamentable confusion.

But this scene was only of a few moments' duration. For the Prince of Wales, instantaneously struck by the conviction that he must either be taken for a drunkard or a madman, mumbled an apology, — murmured something about "mistaking the proper time to rise," — and sank down on his knees again.

The sacred service then proceeded without further interruption; and the only remaining incident worthy of note, relative to the solemn ceremony, was that the Earl of Malmesbury, instead of saying amen along with the rest at the conclusion, gave vent to the word which was uppermost in his mind at the moment. namely, Etiquette.

And now the ceremony was over, the ordeal was passed through, the solemn mockery was accomplished, the sacrifice was consummated, and Caroline of Brunswick was now Princess of Wales.

The bridal party quitted the chapel and repaired to the drawing-rooms of the palace, where a brilliant company was already assembled; and her Royal Highness, the newly married lady, was naturally the "observed of all observers." The quick eye of the sycophantic and servile aristocracy soon perceived, however, — ay, in a very few minutes, — that the prince regarded his bride with anything rather than fond affection; and thus the cue was received as to the opinions to be formed by those lickspittle lords and ladies on a subject concerning which they dared not adopt any sentiments of their own spontaneous initiation.

"My dear Lady Brunel," said the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery aside to her friend, "what do you think of the princess?"

"What does the prince himself think of her?" inquired the cautious lady thus addressed.

"Do you not perceive that he is restless, dissatisfied, and uneasy, in spite of all his endeavours to conceal the real state of his feelings with the gloss of his brilliant fascinations of look, language, and manner?"

"You are right, my dear countess," responded Lady Brunel. "And, moreover, his Royal Highness is — flushed," she added, in a scarcely audible whisper.

"Yes; he has evidently been — ahem! — drinking," observed the countess, in an equally guarded tone.

"And I should say that he was pretty nearly tipsy," rejoined Lady Brunel, now speaking so low that her voice was not more audible than her breathing.

"Yes; quite tipsy," echoed the Dowager-Countess Montgomery. "And now, my dear friend, what do you think of our new princess?"

"That it is the coarsest, vulgarest, commonest importation from Germany with which our world of fashion has ever been afflicted," was Lady Brunel's prompt rejoinder.

And then the two gossips set themselves industriously to work to tear the Princess of Wales to pieces in the most unmerciful style of that heartless criticism which constitutes so important a feature in the occupation of ladies of fashion.

In another corner of the principal drawing-room an earl and a marquis had buttonholed each other; and approaching their countenances with so much solemn mystery that

the tips of their noses almost touched, they entered with awful caution and dread timidity upon the grand topic.

"Well, my dear friend, what does your lordship think of the bride?" asked the earl, who was a man of about sixty-five years of age.

"Nay, rather let me hear what you think, my lord," said the marquis, who was about ten years younger. "You have more experience than I in such matters."

"But what do you fancy the prince thinks of her?" inquired the old earl, cunningly beating about the bush to glean an opinion before he would venture to express any sentiment of his own.

"Does not your lordship perceive that at this very moment his Royal Highness is conversing with Lady Jersey, and that his back is actually turned toward his bride?" said the marquis, in a slow and deliberate tone, every syllable he uttered being fraught with significancy.

"To be sure!" ejaculated the earl. "It is precisely as your lordship represents."

"Well, and now what do you think of the princess?" demanded the marquis.

"Ah! there's only one opinion to be formed," was the prompt reply; "and that is by no means flattering to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales. I suppose, in fact, we must treat her with coldness, and pass the word to our wives and daughters that she is to be run down."

"Just so!" exclaimed the marquis, approvingly. "There can be no doubt as to that being the proper course for us to pursue."

The two nobles accordingly separated, each to find out his family in another part of the room and give them the truly Christian lesson which had just been agreed upon. Oh, the world has never seen and human nature has never been scandalized by a more cruel, remorseless, and cold-blooded set of persons than the English aristocracy! Their servility is vile beyond all despising, and their heartlessness atrocious beyond all cursing.

The two dialogues we have just given will afford the reader a specimen of the general nature of the conversation which was current in the royal drawing-rooms on the bridal evening. The prince was the grand fugleman whose movements were followed by the whole array of fashionables. His conduct

toward his new-made wife was taken as a signal to be implicitly obeyed by that phalanx of lords and ladies whom the newspapers next morning denominated the "élite of the aristocracy." Thus was the unfortunate Caroline of Brunswick foredoomed, not only by her own husband, not only by his royal mother and his paramours, but likewise by all the men of rank, the titled dames, and the high-born damsels who ruled the world of fashion and gave a tone and impress to the mind of the upper classes.

But, as it will hereafter become our pleasing duty to show, the millions adopted a far different line of conduct when the period arrived for pronouncing an opinion between the prince and the princess; and on that occasion, as on all others, did the honest, intelligent, and generous-hearted working classes of these islands adopt the cause of the weak against the strong, of the oppressed against the oppressor, of right against wrong, and of justice against tyranny.

In the meantime we must not anticipate any portion of those important, interesting, and tremendous events which we shall be called upon to chronicle. Let us therefore at once resume the thread of our narrative in its proper place.

The festival was over, the drawing-rooms were deserted, the banqueting-table was abandoned, the valets were extinguishing the lights, and the last carriage was bearing away the latest guests from St. James's Palace. The clocks of the metropolis were proclaiming the hour of one; the king and queen had repaired to Buckingham Palace; and the Prince of Wales was bearing home his bride to Carlton House.

CHAPTER XXX

THE BRIDAL CHAMBER

On arriving at the princely mansion, the heir apparent handed Caroline from the carriage and conducted her through the hall, amidst the ranks of bowing domestics, up the grand staircase, to the principal drawing-room. Lady Jersey, Mrs. Harcourt, and Mrs. Harvey Aston, who had followed from St. James's Palace in another carriage, were now in close attendance on the princess; and after remaining for a few minutes in conversation in the drawing-room, those ladies conducted her Royal Highness away to the bridal chamber.

The instant he found himself alone the prince advanced hurriedly toward a table covered with refreshments, filled a large tumbler to the very brim with port wine, and drank off the potent fluid at a draught. Then, flinging himself upon a sofa, he gave way to his reflections.

But these were of no pleasurable character; and indeed his Royal Highness had many real sources of annoyance, in addition to the imaginary ones which the morbid condition of his mind had conjured up. In the first place, although the Prime Minister had consented to demand of Parliament a grant adequate to meet the liabilities of the prince, he had insisted upon having a schedule of all his debts, — not a mere list of creditors' names and amounts due, but a detailed and business-like balance-sheet, showing for what purposes money had been raised, at what rates of interest the loans had been taken up, and the precise amount of consideration received for all bonds, bills, or other securities then in the market. Now it happened that many of these debts were either of so delicate a nature, or else were accompanied with such circumstances, that he could not possibly enter them in the schedule demanded. In that category was the sum

he owed to the Marquis de Saint Croix; for the fact of his having taken the money of an unfortunate refugee as a trust, and then withheld repayment when it was solicited, would be regarded by the nation as a transaction of the most disgraceful character. And yet within the last three days the marquis had been more than ever pressing for his money; and the prince doubted not but that the Amazon was vindictively urging the Frenchman to be thus peremptory.

These portions of the royal debts which were associated with "delicate circumstances" were consequently no mean sources of annoyance to the prince. Then, again, he had lately received a letter from Pauline Clarendon which contained an announcement that stirred up remorseful feelings in his breast, — the announcement that her sister Octavia was beyond all doubt in the way to become a mother.

In addition to those subjects for meditation, there was his marriage with a being against whom he had conceived a strong aversion; and a presentiment of great evil, as yet unborn, but which would inevitably arise from this ill-assorted union, unfolded its dark and ominous wings overshadowingly upon his soul.

Therefore, during the half-hour which elapsed while he thus remained alone, he paid frequent visits to the side-table and poured the wine down his throat just as if it were water. The consequence was that his countenance acquired a ruddier glow, his eyes became bloodshot, the flesh forming their sockets grew swollen and inflamed, and his step was more unsteady with each journey he made between the sofa and the refreshment-table.

At length the door opened, and the Countess of Jersey made her appearance.

A glance at the prince showed her the condition he was in. She saw that he was three parts intoxicated, and a smile of triumph for an instant shone upon her lips. But the next moment it changed into an expression of the most winning sweetness as she bent her lustrous, beaming, velvet-black eyes upon the drunken voluptuary whose swinish condition was only calculated to inspire disgust. She had, however, a certain part to perform, namely, to manage matters so that the newly married couple should be mutually loathsome; and this part, which had been adopted by the countess

through motives of jealousy and envy toward her royal rival, was also encouraged by the queen herself.

"The banquet of love is served up for my attendance, I suppose?" said his Royal Highness, with as much bitterness as a vacant manner and a difficulty of articulation would permit him to assume.

"The bridal chamber is in readiness for your reception, my well-beloved George," returned the countess, placing herself by his side and taking his hand between both her own. "But you do not appear happy, and it cuts me to the soul to observe this downcast demeanour —"

"Frances, do you really love me?" demanded the prince, abruptly.

"You know that I love you, George," replied the siren.

"Then pity me, pity me, my dearest friend," exclaimed the heir apparent, who was becoming maudlin sentimental under the influence of the liquor he had imbibed.

"Oh, I do pity you, George — beloved George!" murmured the countess, throwing her arms about his neck and covering his inflamed countenance with kisses. "But did I not tell you on the day of her arrival that she was no fitting wife for you?"

"The mischief was done, the evil was already consummated, and it was too late to retract," said the prince, his speech interrupted with many a hiccough. "Six hundred thousand pounds of debts were not to be trifled with, — they might have lost me the throne — But, perdition seize upon it!" he exclaimed, with an almost savage abruptness; "fill me a tumbler of wine, Jersey, no paltry insignificant glass, but a good tumbler, and let me drown thought, and care, and everything that presses upon my mind."

The countess hastened to perform the part of Hebe; and as she advanced to the refreshment-table, the prince followed all her movements with his eyes as if his lascivious looks could plunge beneath that rustling velvet which clothed her, and revel in the contemplation of all the charms concealed. Then as she returned toward him, with the brimming tumbler in her hand, he slowly and gloatingly surveyed the countenance that beamed with smiles, the bosom that was half-exposed, the delicate hand that held the glass, and the beautiful feet and ankles that glancingly bore the graceful being over the thick carpet of the gorgeous saloon.

He took the wine, he kissed the hand that presented it, he drained the tumbler, and then he drew toward him the designing creature, the effluent sensuousness of whose charms was stealing over him despite the emasculating effects of the deep potations in which he had indulged.

"You told me that you loved me, Frances?" he said, as he smoothed down her beauteous hair.

"I have told you so a thousand times, dear George," was the answer.

"Tell me, then, what I am to do," continued the prince. "Shall I repair to the bridal chamber, or shall I at once let her Royal Highness understand that she is my wife only in name?"

"Oh, you must not carry matters to such a dangerous extreme as this," exclaimed the countess. "Your treatment of her Royal Highness would get abroad, and the injury to your reputation would be irreparable. Come, my dear George," continued the artful woman, "the time is passing rapidly, and it is now half-past two o'clock. Let me present you another glass of wine, and then to the nuptial chamber."

"Be it so, be it so!" muttered the prince, with subdued irritability of manner. Then, after having drained the tumbler once more, he said, "And now, Frances, you must let me take your arm to — to — the door of --- of — the bridal chamber; for my fee— ee—lings are overpow—ow—ering me."

Had his Royal Highness said that he was so drunk he could scarcely stand, he would have been nearer the mark; but a tipsy person seldom thinks that he is really intoxicated, and at all events is certain to assume any reason rather than the truth for his strangeness of conduct.

The Countess of Jersey supported the prince as well as she was able; but he nearly dragged her down more than once as he staggered and stumbled along the passage leading to the nuptial apartment. Fortunately for his Royal Highness, there was no loitering dependent nor curious menial in the passage at the time; and thus the beastly state of intoxication in which he was seeking the bridal chamber escaped the notice of any of the members of his household.

At length they reached that room which ought to have been made the sanctuary of love, but which a disgusting voluptuary was about to pollute with his presence. The

conviction that he was not in a fit state to enter that chamber appeared suddenly to flash to the mind of the prince; and somewhat startled into sobriety, he pressed his hand to his brow, leaned against the wall, and stared intently upon Lady Jersey's countenance for nearly a minute.

"My dear Frances," he muttered, in a faltering, hiccoughing tone, "I don't think—ink — that I'm altogether as I ought to be — "

"What do you fancy to be the matter with yourself, my dear George?" demanded the countess, likewise speaking in an undertone.

"I — I — begin to think—ink," stuttered his Royal Highness, with a look of hebetation and a stolid smile, "that I'd much better go with you — to your room—oom — and pass the night — hic — in — your — hic — arms."

"Much as I should rejoice, dear George, to have you as my companion," returned the countess, her heart in reality heaving at the sickly vinous smell with which the royal voluptuary's breath was laden, "I must implore you to renounce the idea instantaneously. I have already told you that it would be ruinous — "

"True — true," muttered the prince. "But I feel—eel — so — hic — so very queer."

"It is the excitement," remarked Lady Jersey, with a bewitching smile. "You have had a great deal to agitate you within the last few days."

"But don't you think, Frances — that is, I mean — hic — don't you really believe that I've taken a — hic — a leetle drop — just one glass — hic — too much?" said the prince, his speech growing more broken and the power of sustaining himself upon his legs becoming every instant less effective.

"Do not entertain such notions, George," whispered the countess, in a tone of tender remonstrance. "You are a little excited, but nothing more. Indeed, it is scarcely possible to perceive that you have been drinking anything at all."

"Are you sure, Frances?" asked the prince, now really inclined to fancy himself sober, so sincere, frank, and ingenuous seemed the assurance which his patrician paramour gave him. "Well — if I'm sober, then, I'll make up my mind — hic — to — to — "

But here he swayed backward and forward in so alarming a manner, as he moved away from the wall against which he had been leaning, that he nearly fell headlong himself and brought the countess down with him. She however exerted all her strength at the moment, and averted the disagreeable catastrophe. Then, having received a few caresses which his Royal Highness thought fit to bestow upon her, Lady Jersey slowly opened the door of the nuptial chamber.

The Princess of Wales was reposing in the bridal bed. A soft and dreamy drowsiness had stolen gradually upon her when the bedchamber ladies had retired and she was left alone. It was not an actual slumber that steeped her senses in oblivion, but a partial somnolence which closed the eyes, lulled the physical energies into rest, and yet left the mind so far awake that the least incident would arouse it altogether.

The room was sumptuously furnished. Everything was new, and the most exquisite taste had superintended the appointments and decorations of that nuptial chamber. The cheeks of the princess were slightly flushed; and she looked really beautiful as she reposed in that bridal bed. There was a halo of innocence, a perfume of chastity about the fair sleeper, which would have ravished the heart of any man of honourable, generous, and delicate feeling.

Her moist red lips were slightly apart, revealing the pearls which lay beneath, — those brilliant teeth that Lady Jersey had dared to decry. A soft dimple on the rounded chin gave an air of girlish sweetness to the whole countenance. One well-shaped arm, white as alabaster, lay outside the coverlid; the snowy nightdress, open in front, revealed the bosom rich in its glowing yet virgin contours.

The mellow lustre of the lamps in the bridal chamber gave just sufficient light and warmth to render the place a fitting sanctuary for love. The fire had died away in the grate; and the atmosphere was of a pleasant temperature. The curtains shaded the couch, save where the head of the princess lay upon the luxurious pillow; and with the gentle and regular respiration to which her bosom rose and fell as if in long, measured, stifled sighs, the hue of the rose deepened or grew lighter upon her cheeks.

Suddenly a sound reached her ears, and she half-started up in her couch. Her eyes were instinctively flung toward the door, upon the threshold of which she beheld her husband,

the Prince of Wales. A deep blush instantaneously suffused her cheeks, and, with a natural modesty, she was about to veil her countenance behind the curtain, when it struck her all in a moment that she had caught a glimpse of another countenance in the doorway. An irresistible impulse caused the princess to dart a second look in that direction ere she shrank behind the drapery of the couch; and her eyes met those of the Countess of Jersey just at the moment as her ladyship was actually pushing the heir apparent into the chamber. Then, at that instant, — transitory as was this meeting of their eyes, — it struck the princess that the countenance of Lady Jersey wore an expression of fiendish triumph and diabolical joy that made her absolutely hideous for the instant, and carried a panic to the soul of the princess.

As if experiencing the blow of a sudden consternation, the affrighted Caroline fell back upon the pillow, while a sensation at the heart and a bewilderment in the brain sent the influence of a prophetic warning thrilling throughout her entire being.

At the same moment that she had thus recoiled as it were from the serpent look which had been flung upon her from the threshold of the bridal chamber, the door was closed and fastened outside; for Lady Jersey had resolved that neither one of the royal couple should have a chance of escaping from the companionship of the other, until it suited her purpose to allow such egress. Her object was to inspire them with a mutual disgust; and as she tripped lightly away from the door which she had just closed, into the chamber which had been provided for her in Carlton House, she smiled with an infernal malignity which for a moment made her beauteous countenance resemble that of a fallen angel entering upon the threshold of hell.

Meantime the prince felt himself suddenly abandoned to all the contingencies of a most awkward predicament, the instant that the door closed behind him. Again did he become slightly sobered, enough to receive and understand the conviction that he was in reality at an advanced stage of intoxication; and, with that desperate energy which drunken men are sometimes enabled to call to their aid, he said to himself, " By God! I must appear sober at all events."

Assuming therefore as smiling and intelligent a look as he could possibly command, and steadying himself upon his legs

with all his might and main, he advanced slowly and cautiously toward the couch with the intention of saying something flattering and conciliatory to his bride. For the thought now uppermost in his mind was, that he must in any case avert the ignominy, scandal, and shame of having his condition recognized by her Royal Highness.

But as he was traversing the room with a caution as gingerly as if he were proceeding along a tight-rope or walking upon eggs, he suddenly encountered a chair. All his ideas were thrown into confusion in a moment. Stopping short he stood gazing at the chair in the strangest bewilderment. He strove to collect himself, — he had sense enough to make this effort, — but he could not immediately succeed. The chair bothered him. He could not make it out, and to his topsyturvy brain it assumed an appearance as sinister and as ominous as that of the windmills to the fevered imagination of Cervantes' hero.

"Well, I'll be damned if I know who you are, or how the devil — hic — you came here," muttered the prince at last, as he stood swaying to and fro in front of the high-backed crimson velvet chair which he thus inanely apostrophized.

These words — the sound of which, and not the sense, alone reached the ears of the princess — startled her from that consternation into which the look of the Countess of Jersey had thrown her; and now, suddenly recollecting that her husband was in the room, she was seized with a strange fluttering of the heart, — mingled emotions of pain and pleasure, alarm and hope, anxiety and suspense, thus agitating in her bosom.

"Oh, if he would love me," she thought within herself, "I would strive hard to love him in return — notwithstanding — "

But she could not allow the secret silent voice which was speaking in her soul to finish the sentiment; for the image of the young, the handsome, the absent Bergami rose up in her mind, as if to warn her that she could not love another under any circumstances. Then again the reminiscence flashed to her brain that her husband was in the room; but she dare not move, scarcely breathe, much less draw back the curtain which separates him from her view.

"This is singular — damnation singular!" growled the prince, after the pause of nearly a minute. Then, plucking

up a desperate spirit, he extended his arms toward the chair in order to ascertain who or what the object of his bewilderment really could be; but overbalancing himself, he fell forward, upsetting the chair, and rolling ignominiously on the carpet.

The princess now gave vent to an ejaculation of alarm, started up, and drew back the curtain. She perceived her royal husband making desperate attempts to regain his legs; but it did not for an instant strike her that he was overcome by liquor. Her immediate and very natural impression was that he had fallen accidentally and had received some serious injury which prevented him from rising. The natural modesty of her sex forbade her from hastening forth to his assistance, for, though his wife according to ecclesiastical ceremony, she was as yet virgin of his embrace; and still it became more and more evident to her that the prince could not recover his legs unaided.

"Oh, what can I do? Shall I ring the bell?" she exclaimed, clutching at the cord of silk-and gold which hung within reach.

"No — no — I — I'm all right — hic!" stammered forth the prince, as he renewed his desperate attempts to raise himself up by means of the overturned chair.

"But you are injured — seriously injured, I fear," said the kind-hearted Caroline, as far as ever from suspecting the real condition of the bridegroom.

"Don't be — hic — uneasy," faltered his Royal Highness, getting up as far as a kneeling posture. "I'm overcome by — hic — my fee—ee—lings — "

And as he spoke he made another tremendous effort to recover his legs. It was completely successful; but the impetus given to his locomotive inclination sent him staggering on for a few paces, and a heavy lurch brought him in violent contact with the bed. He had sense enough at the time to feel that he would give worlds to be enabled to save himself; but he could not, and in this manner was he precipitated as it were, by his own unmanageable condition, upon the bosom of the bride.

Caroline was now more seriously alarmed than before. She had too much keenness of perception to fancy for a single instant that her royal husband had flung himself into her arms in obedience to the rapture of an enthusiastic

affection; and she could no longer believe that he was hurt by his fall over the chair, it being pretty evident that he had no broken limbs. Her ideas and conjectures being thus suddenly diverted into another channel, the thought flashed to her mind that the prince must be overcome by liquor rather than by his feelings; and as at that very instant he raised his head from her bosom, where it had remained pillowed for half a minute, a whiff of his vinous breath blew upon her face.

An inexpressible sensation of loathing seized upon the unfortunate lady, her heart heaved against the disgusting beast who was now endeavouring to soothe her with his caresses, and her very soul revolted against the idea of a closer and more intimate contact with her swinish bridegroom. With a natural impulse, therefore, she pushed him away, at the same time that she burst into a flood of tears. The royal voluptuary rolled once more upon the carpet; and the bride, burying her head in the pillow of the nuptial couch, gave way to that outpouring of grief which it was impossible for her to control.

Merciful God! was this the first gentleman in Europe, — the most polished prince in all the world? It has been said that no man is a hero to his *valet de chambre;* it has likewise been said that if our forefathers were taken off their stilts, they would appear very despicable beings indeed. And most assuredly are these assertions correct; and it may be safely added that if royalty be only seen in its privacy — stripped of the pomp which invests it with a false grandeur and the frippery which supplies it with an adventitious brilliancy — it will in ninety-nine instances out of a hundred sink below the level of pity and merit only contempt. Such would have been the case with George, Prince of Wales, even in his sober moments; but when we behold him reduced to the filthy condition in which he dared to seek the chamber of his innocent virgin bride, we can only observe that it needed but this one act of cowardly brutality to crown all the infamy of his antecedent career.

Hours passed, the lamps had burned out, the morning had dawned some time, but the thick window-curtains excluded the light from the nuptial chamber. The prince awoke, and the first sensation which he experienced was that of an icy chill all over. He stretched out his arms; one hand

encountered the bedpost, the other a chair overturned. Strange and alarming recollections began to dawn in upon his brain, and the racking headache which he felt was no insignificant evidence of their truth. A deeper and more searching chill than that which he had previously experienced penetrated into his very heart's core as the damning conviction settled in his mind that he had been steeped to the very eyes in ebriety on the previous night. And if there were any doubt still remaining upon this point, it was speedily dissipated by the ignominious certainty that his Royal Highness was lying upon the carpet by the side of the nuptial couch.

Yes, he had fallen asleep where he had last tumbled down: and the morning air had imparted to his whole frame that chill which he experienced upon awaking. Loathing himself, loathing his bride, loathing the whole world, the wretched prince rose as noiselessly as he could from the floor; and, leaning over the couch, he listened in breathless silence. The low respiration which met his ear reassured him on one point: the princess was sleeping there. She had not quitted the chamber in disgust, she had not abandoned him in mingled indignation and loathing. It was therefore yet possible to rescue the adventures of the bridal night from exposure and himself from the consequent ridicule, disgrace, and infamy.

Somewhat consoled by this reflection, the prince groped his way to the window and drew aside the curtains. The golden lustre of day now streamed into the nuptial chamber; and his Royal Highness ventured to look at himself in the mirror standing upon the toilet-table. Ah, well might he shrink back with deeper loathing than ever; for, behold! the frill of his shirt, the white silk waistcoat, and the lapels of the exquisitely cut dress coat which he wore were all stained and encrusted with the contents of his stomach, vomited during his sleep.

Hastily tearing off the offensive garments and slipping on an elegant dressing-gown, the prince approached the couch. Caroline was sleeping upon a pillow still wet with the tears of burning anguish which she had shed. Slumber had fallen upon her through the sheer exhaustion of her physical and mental energies; and the sobbings, in the midst of which the unhappy princess had sunk into sleep, continued to

break her respiration at short intervals. There was an expression of sadness upon her countenance, and it was easy to perceive that the thoughts which now filled her mind in the form of a dream were of a profoundly infelicitous character.

While the heir apparent was yet gazing upon her and wondering what would be the result of the outrageous brutality involved in his conduct of the past night, the Princess of Wales awoke with a sudden start, and her eyes instantaneously met those of her husband.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE MORNING AFTER THE BRIDAL NIGHT

His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales could not possibly feel otherwise than overwhelmed with confusion. The waking-up had been so sudden that he had no time to slip away from the side of the bed ere his looks encountered those of the princess.

Then to his mind flashed the conviction, — rapid as the glance of lightning athwart the sky, — that whatever might be his sentiments toward his bride, however deeply he loathed and abhorred this marriage into which circumstances had forced him, he nevertheless had no right to treat that inoffensive and innocent woman with the most cowardly indignity and the most scandalous outrage.

Moreover, he felt all the littleness and all the degradation of the position in which he had placed himself. A man does not choose to have his pride wounded even in the presence of one whom he either hates or for whom he entertains the most contemptuous indifference; but the annoyance is far greater when the humiliation is self-inflicted. The prince knew that Caroline had seen him in the most disgusting and repulsive phase of his character, had seen him in the swinish loathsomeness of a drunken debauchee, had seen him in a state when he might have given utterance to any language however filthy, or performed pranks however ridiculous. He therefore felt that he was stripped of all his dignity, alike as a prince and as a man, in her presence; and it was the most humiliating incident of his life, the most galling moment of his existence, when she suddenly awoke and lifted her eyes toward his countenance.

And what were the emotions, what were the feelings, what were the sentiments of the princess herself? A burning blush

suffused her cheeks, overspread her neck, descended to her bosom, — a blush of natural modesty mingled with indignation, when she beheld her husband standing by the bedside, and then at the same instant recollected the occurrences of the past night. But her anger was only transitory. The goodness of her disposition suddenly lulled it altogether, as oil subdues the fury of the waves; and the thought flashed to her mind that her husband was there to offer his excuses for the state of ebriety in which he had sought the nuptial chamber a few hours previously. This sentiment on her part was quite natural. It was indeed a homage to the presumed refinement and vaunted polish of the prince's character; and she as a lady judged him as a gentleman.

Then was it that the true generosity of her disposition shone forth in all its amiable artlessness, in all its ingenuous beauty, in all its unsophisticated innocence. She loved him not, and yet she felt for him; she entertained not the slightest particle of affection for him, and yet she could not bear to think that he should stand humiliated, abashed, and ashamed in her presence. Nay, she had even every possible motive to abhor and loathe him; but her sentiments were all of that truly forgiving nature which characterized her sex in general and herself in particular.

O Woman! vile, degraded, and unworthy the name of Man must that individual be, who could treat thee with disrespect; but worse, ten thousand times worse than the most savage brute or the most venomous reptile, is he who could bear himself toward thee with a coward and a barbarian cruelty.

The countenance of her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales expanded all in a moment into the sweetest smiles; the beneficence of paradise shed its illumination upon those fair features; and, half-raising herself in the nuptial couch, she extended her hand toward the heir apparent, exclaiming in the softest music of her silver tones, " My lord, my husband, my prince, if you mean an apology, I want none — will have none."

Coldly did the royal barbarian take that hand, which he scarcely pressed even for a single instant. Then, dropping it abruptly, and with a dogged sternness of countenance and severity of manner, he said, " I thank your Royal Highness for having made me sensible that you fully appreciate the

enormity of my offence, but that you are generous enough to forgive it."

"Is it possible that I have done wrong?" cried the princess, grieved and alarmed by the words and bearing of her husband.

"Since you do not choose to lay any specific charge against me, madam," responded the prince, in the same strain of cold heartlessness, "it is not likely that I should level any accusation against you. But it would be as well, under existing circumstances, if we understood each other rightly on certain matters. I therefore crave the attention of your Royal Highness for a few minutes."

And, putting back the curtain, the heir apparent seated himself by the side of the couch, while the princess gazed upon him in mingled wonderment and dismay.

"You are aware, madam," resumed the unfeeling bridegroom, "that our union has been one of convention, and not of love; one of policy, and not of affection. I do not expect that you could have entertained any regard for me, even though the most flattering representations had been made to you concerning my personal appearance, my manners, my intelligence, my disposition, and my conduct. At all events, I am not vain nor foolish enough to suppose that even if you had experienced any good feeling on my behalf, it could possibly have survived the incidents of the past night. On the other hand, I will frankly admit that I experience no tender sentiment toward yourself. That you may be worthy of the highest esteem, the most devoted friendship, and the most ardent love, I will not question for a single instant; but I beg you to remember that we frail and erring mortals have no control over our own inclinations. Let us, then, admit — mutually admit — that there exists no love between us, and that there never can exist any. By thus looking our position in the face, we at once grapple with a difficulty which, if we avoid it now, will only force itself upon our notice with a more crushing effect hereafter. The result of all this reasoning on my part is to bring your mind to recognize the necessity of our coming to a prompt understanding with each other."

"And that understanding?" gasped the princess, inquiringly, as she still remained gazing in mingled astonishment and terror upon the husband who was thus addressing her in

a style of deliberate, cold-blooded, and systematic heartlessness.

"Ah! that understanding," repeated his Royal Highness; "well, it is for me to be as explicit, as frank, and as candid as circumstances demand. Look you, madam, your position is somewhat altered by your elevation to the rank of a British princess; and you will no doubt see ample reason to experience the liveliest gratitude at the change."

"Are you serious? or is this a pure mockery?" demanded Caroline, her indignation now rising once more.

"I never was more serious in my life," answered the heir apparent; "and, upon my soul! I wish to say nothing to wound your feelings. I even deplore the necessity which compels me thus to speak out. But what are the facts? The other day you were a comparatively unknown and obscure princess, belonging to a petty German court the name of which was not over familiar even to persons tolerably well versed in geographical knowledge. Now you are the Princess of Wales, your name is already written in the grand page of England's history. You have become the envy of myriads and myriads of high-born dames and titled ladies; and you will shine, if you choose, as the central star of the most splendid galaxy of rank, wealth, fashion, and aristocratic influence, upon the face of the earth. Surely, then, this is a position for which you may feel grateful. It is almost the highest to which human ambition could possibly aspire, and even the higher one will some day be yours also. Well, madam, you are now Princess of Wales, and in due time you may become Queen of England. Let all this suffice you. Content yourself with the brilliancy and the grandeur of this position, enjoy yourself as you will, be entirely your own mistress, and, in return, leave me to be as entirely my own master."

The Princess Caroline fell back upon her pillow, covered her countenance with her hands, and strove to collect her thoughts. She seemed as if she were walking in a dream, or endeavouring to follow some object that was guiding her through a mist. Athwart the cloudy confusion of her ideas, she fancied that she caught a scintillation of the prince's real meaning; but she was too much bewildered to fix her mental gaze steadily upon it and assure herself that she did really comprehend its true nature.

"Do you understand me?" demanded his Royal Highness, after a long pause.

"No. You must explain yourself more fully," she replied with the curtness of an intense agitation which she vainly struggled.to subdue.

"I mean, then," resumed the heir apparent, in a tone of vexation, "that after the honeymoon you will consent to exist as my wife only in name, and that you will not attempt the slightest interference with my pursuits or my pleasures."

"Ah! I can consent to that, provided that the repudiation be not public," said the princess, her mind suddenly relieved from a cruel anxiety. "I thought, in the first instance, that you were about to propose a complete separation; and I would retire from the world altogether, seek the profoundest solitude, or even fly from existence itself, rather than be divorced the very day after my marriage. For, alas! the world would put its own construction upon such an event — "

"We need not discuss that point, madam," interposed the heir apparent, "since I have assured you that I contemplate nothing of the sort. No; it is my wish, as much as it can be yours, that we should sustain the conventionalities of married life. In public you will receive from me the attention and respect due to a wife; in private you will tutor yourself to exercise all possible forbearance. Upon this understanding we may avoid an open rupture, we may even become friends — "

"It is for you to dictate, and for me to obey," said the princess, in a tone of real and unaffected meekness.

"Ah! but what I want you to do, madam," cried the heir apparent, "is to pledge yourself — solemnly pledge yourself — that you will keep your own counsel and make no confidants. You must not speak ill of me in the letters which you write home to Germany, nor when the king asks you from time to time whether you are happy, nor when you are in private and familiar discourse with my sisters, nor in any unguarded moment, amongst the ladies who will become your acquaintances — "

"Oh, I will keep everything treasured up in my own heart," exclaimed Caroline. "Have you any further commands to give me?"

"Do you address that question to me in seriousness or

in mockery?" cried the prince, turning his looks completely upon the princess, who had just withdrawn her hands from over her countenance.

"I know not why your Royal Highness should suspect me of duplicity, in language, in manner, or in thought," was the mild and gentle remonstrance. "I did not expect to win your love, but I did not despair of obtaining your confidence. To everything you have proposed, I assent; to everything you may propose, I shall likewise assent, — provided that you do naught to disgrace me publicly. I have now nothing but my good intentions, my fair fame, and my own rectitude of conduct to enable me to secure the regard of the British people — "

"A fig for their regard!" ejaculated the prince, contemptuously. "The British people are born to be the slaves of their sovereigns, the serfs of their rulers, the 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' for the high-born and great; and so long as they remain quiet, we give them credit for loyalty. When they show any manifestation of discontent, we set the attorney-general to work, and he soon sends the ringleaders to the gibbet or the hulks. If that won't do, then we treat the people with a few charges of cavalry, or may be a dose of cannon-balls; and when we have completely put them down, we proclaim to the world that the rebels have returned to their allegiance. That is the way we manage matters in this country; and therefore you need not trouble yourself for a single moment about the people's regard. But, to return to the topic most interesting to ourselves," exclaimed his Royal Highness, "do we now perfectly understand each other?"

"I at least understand the wishes that you have expressed," said Caroline; "and you have received the assurance of my readiness to comply with them."

"And you pledge yourself to implicit secrecy with regard to this compact?" observed the heir apparent.

"I will make no pledge of so solemn a nature unless you give me one in return," said the princess, after a few moments' pause, during which the natural dignity of her sex began to assert its empire.

"And what pledge do you demand?" inquired the prince, somewhat startled by the sudden display of spirit on the part of her whom a moment before he had looked upon as a

soft, silly fool easily modelled to his own will, and equally easy to be crushed altogether.

"I demand your most solemn and sacred promise that you will never inflict upon me any public disgrace, nor subject me to any humiliation which may become patent to the eyes of the world," and the princess enunciated these terms in a more decided voice and with a more resolute manner than she had previously ventured to assume throughout this painful interview.

"I give you the pledge you require," said the heir apparent; and he repeated the words in which she had expressed herself. "Now you will ratify your own portion of our compact with an equal solemnity?"

"Yes, unhesitatingly," replied the princess. "I vow, then, to keep my own council, to make no complaints either in writing or in speaking, and to attempt the exercise of no authority over you. Will that suffice?"

"You have fully comprehended my meaning," was the prompt reply. "During the usual period of what is vulgarly — and, I suppose, facetiously — called the honeymoon, I shall become the partner of your chamber; afterward, I regain my liberty and act as my own master. And now you must permit me to observe that I am grateful for the readiness with which you have entered into my views and assented to my wishes. Nay, more, you must even permit me to apologize for my conduct of the past night; and I can assure you that when the hour for retiring to rest shall again come around, I will not seek your chamber in a condition as repulsive to yourself as it is humiliating to me."

Thus speaking, the Prince of Wales rose from his seat, made a graceful bow, and retired into his dressing-room.

"And it is for this that I have become Princess of Wales?" murmured Caroline to herself, the instant that she was left alone. "Oh, that I had never consented to leave my native land, never allowed myself to be persuaded by my parents to accept the hand of a foreign prince! But let me not repine; no — no," she said, in a hoarse whisper, as she pressed her fingers to her throbbing brows; "let me not repine! Resignation, meekness, docility, and endurance will best become me now. Never, never was woman placed in a position so difficult. The least error, and I shall be lost. Oh, he already wishes to rid himself of me, and we have not

yet been married a day. Would that I had some kind friend to counsel me, some disinterested monitor to guide me now."

And as the unfortunate princess covered her countenance with her fair hands, the tears trickled between her taper fingers.

Presently she heard the key turning in the outer door of the chamber; and, hastily wiping her eyes, she assumed as much composure as she could possibly summon to her aid. The next moment Lady Jersey entered the room, and with an air of profound respect, she approached the couch. A glance convinced her that only one person had lain in that nuptial bed; and she was still there. For an instant, a single instant, did a smile of triumph waver upon the lips of the countess; but it was gone the very next moment, and Caroline observed it not.

"Good morning, dear Lady Jersey," said the princess, replying with unaffected frankness to the ceremonial salutation with which the countess greeted her. "Did you not revisit the chamber for a moment last night, or, rather, at an early hour this morning? I mean, when his Royal Highness —"

"According to the prescribed custom, may it please your Royal Highness," observed Lady Jersey, "I accompanied the illustrious bridegroom to the threshold —"

"And did you not regard me in a very peculiar manner?" demanded Caroline. "Now, unless I was dreaming at the moment, it struck me that there was a very angry expression upon your countenance; and this was wrong on your part, inasmuch as I had already assured you that I am in no way jealous of your friendship with the prince, and I had even made the same representation to him relative to yourself."

"Oh, your Royal Highness must not imagine for a moment," exclaimed Lady Jersey, her countenance becoming scarlet, "that I should dare to assume in your presence any other mien than that of the profoundest respect. When I accompanied his Royal Highness as far as the threshold of this chamber, I saw that you recognized me, and I saluted your Royal Highness with an inclination of the head, perhaps accompanied with a smile of the most respectful devotedness."

"Ah! then the light must have deceived me," said Caroline.

"Assuredly, your Royal Highness," observed the artful patrician lady. "I hope that when you know me better, you will learn to regard me as one of your sincerest and firmest friends."

"Is it possible that you will become my friend, Jersey?" exclaimed the princess, as much delighted as astonished at the assurance.

"It would be the height of my ambition and the crowning of my happiness," was the immediate response. "But so long as your Royal Highness puts faith in the vile calumnies which are whispered concerning myself, and which have evidently reached your ears — "

"Calumnies!" ejaculated the princess, in astonishment. "I have heard no calumnies relative to you."

"Then to what did your Royal Highness allude when you spoke so significantly of a presumed friendship between the prince and myself?" inquired the countess, now unfeignedly surprised in her turn.

"Oh, do you call those calumnies?" exclaimed the princess. "I thought that you English ladies were too proud and happy at being the prince's mistresses, to look upon the reports thereof as calumnies."

The countess once more blushed up to the eyes, and averted her head; but when she had somewhat recovered from her confusion she threw a rapid searching glance upon Caroline, to read in her looks what was passing in her soul.

"Your Royal Highness has altogether mistaken me and been misled by those rumours which I more vehemently than ever denounce as calumnies," said Lady Jersey, convinced by Caroline's manner that she was altogether serious in her remarks and entertained not even the remotest idea of sarcastic allusion.

"Would you have me believe that you are not the prince's mistress?" she demanded, surveying Lady Jersey with mingled astonishment and incredulity.

"Should I dare offer your Royal Highness the humble tribute of my most devoted friendship, if there were any impropriety of such a nature in my conduct?" said Lady Jersey, affecting the virtuous indignation of a woman outraged by a foul calumny. "No, your Royal Highness, I have been belied; and I implore you to believe that such is indeed the truth."

"I dare not doubt you, my dear Jersey," said Caroline. "You have no inducement to deceive me. I was prepared to like you even while imagining you to be the prince's mistress; how much more shall I love you, now that I have been assured of the contrary? Give me your hand; henceforth we will be true and faithful friends to each other."

"Dear princess — as amiable as you are beautiful!" murmured the false woman, pressing Caroline's hand to her lips and pretending to be deeply affected. "Believe me when I declare that your Royal Highness will have no friend more devoted, more faithful, more loving than myself; and if you should deign to make me your confidant — because all great princesses like you have confidants to whom they unbosom their secrets — "

"But suppose there are secrets which their husbands have enjoined them not to reveal?" interjected the artless Caroline.

"Then for that very reason they must be sure and act contrary to their husband's commands," was the audacious response which the countess at once hazarded.

"And why so?" inquired the princess, her air suddenly becoming pensive.

"Because the confidant in such a case will tell the princess whether the husband's motive was a worthy one in enjoining the particular secret to be kept," said the countess. "Husbands are not immaculate, even though they be princes; and since your Royal Highness has deigned to distinguish me with your friendship, I am bound to give you honest, candid, and ingenuous counsel."

"Oh, Heaven knows I require it badly enough!" exclaimed Caroline, clasping her hands fervently.

"Your Royal Highness will find no flatterer, but a truthful and plain-speaking confidant in me," returned the countess: "that is to say," she immediately added, "if I am really to consider myself a confidant as well as a friend."

"Assuredly, most assuredly," observed the princess, altogether thrown off her guard by the air of sincerity and well-intentioned frankness which the hypocritical woman was such an adept at assuming. "But whatever secrets I may reveal to you — "

"Will remain entombed in my own breast," added Lady Jersey. "Your Royal Highness must know that at the

English court, and likewise in a princely household such as this, there are invariably two parties: one is the party for the king or prince, as the case may be, and the other is the party for the queen or princess. There will consequently soon be two parties in Carlton House, and I am glad that the friendship vouchsafed to me by your Royal Highness has at once determined me which side to take."

"Then you will be as it were opposed to the prince?" exclaimed Caroline ingenuously.

"Not exactly opposed to him, because these parties are not precisely hostile to each other," explained Lady Jersey; "but they serve as camarillas or secret councils to each exalted personage. Nevertheless, even were I obliged to oppose the prince in any sense of the term, I should not hesitate to do so provided I was consulting the veritable interests of your Royal Highness."

"Then, after all, the prince is really no favourite of yours?" cried her Royal Highness.

"Far from it," responded Lady Jersey. "Do you wish me to be candid?"

"I do," said Caroline. "Speak openly — undisguisedly."

"Then must your Royal Highness now learn that I hate the Prince of Wales," answered the countess, throwing an accent of deep and concentrated acerbity into her tone.

"You hate him!" repeated Caroline, in wonderment. "Then why did you accept a post about my person which would compel you to take up your residence beneath the roof of Carlton House?"

"Because I already loved you before I even saw you," was the immediate reply, delivered with such an air of affectionate sincerity that the princess, naturally warm and enthusiastic, threw her arms around Lady Jersey's neck and covered her cheeks with kisses and with tears.

"But tell me wherefore you hate my royal husband?" inquired the confiding, unsuspecting Caroline, when she had thus lavished the proofs of her gratitude and friendship upon the false woman who was thus successfully entangling her in the inextricable meshes of a profound duplicity.

"I hate the Prince of Wales," replied Lady Jersey, assuming the air of an outraged woman conscious of integrity, "because he would have seduced me into that path which calumny represents me to be treading. Oh, princess," ex-

claimed the accomplished hypocrite, throwing into her voice all the tremulousness and into her manner all the excitement of deep emotion, "I am innocent of any wrong, and yet your husband has caused me to be regarded as a faithless wife. Can I do otherwise than hate him?"

"Alas! alas! it is very sad," murmured Caroline, the tears trickling down her cheeks. "But I will endeavour to recompense you for the injury which you have thus sustained at the hands of him who is now my husband —"

"Your friendship and your confidence will amply reward me, dear princess," hastily exclaimed the artful lady.

"And you shall have both," rejoined Caroline, in a fervid tone. "Nevertheless," she continued, suddenly recollecting herself, "there were certain things which the prince said to me just now and relative to which he exacted a solemn vow of secrecy —"

"Oh, is it possible that his Royal Highness should have commenced the work of coercion, intimidation, or tyranny with you?" exclaimed Lady Jersey, affecting the deepest sorrow and surprise. "Alas! poor princess — But you will pardon me —"

"Pardon you, dear Jersey," ejaculated Caroline. "What have you done to offend me? You are speaking to me with the purest motives and in the kindest sense —"

"Yes, dear princess," interrupted the treacherous woman, "and you must repose implicit confidence in me, for I perceive that dangers are already overclouding the sky of your existence. It would be wrong, nay, it would be folly, madness, to observe pledges extorted by menace, or to adhere to vows wrung from you at a moment when you exercised not a proper command over yourself. Besides, if you regard me in the light of a confidant, and as I shall retain inviolable all the communications you may impart to me, there can be no possible harm in your revealing the secrets to which you allude. You must consult me with regard to them, for I already perceive that they involve matters seriously affecting your happiness and your welfare; but it is utterly impossible that I can tender any advice until I know all — everything without reserve —"

"You shall know all — everything," said Caroline, in a tone of decision; for she was now completely enmeshed in the toils which the duplicity and speciousness, the treachery

and false friendship of Lady Jersey had been gradually yet surely weaving around her.

But scarcely was that promise of entire confidence given, when the door opened, and Mrs. Harvey Aston and Mrs. Harcourt entered the room.

"Not another word upon that subject now, dear princess," said Lady Jersey, leaning forward over the bed and speaking in a low rapid whisper. "We will shortly seize an opportunity to converse at our leisure."

"Be it so, my dearest friend," responded Caroline, in the same subdued tone; and the unsuspecting princess felt her heart leap at the idea that she had secured the love, devotion, and fidelity of a woman whom she now looked upon as the most generous-hearted as well as the most calumniated of her sex.

Her Royal Highness now rose from the virgin nuptial couch, and submitted herself to the operations of the toilet.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE EX-BAGMAN AT CARLTON HOUSE

IMMEDIATELY after breakfast, the Prince of Wales repaired to his own private apartment, — that splendidly furnished chamber where we have already so often seen him, and with which the secret staircase communicated.

He wished to be alone, or at all events with no other companionship than his own thoughts; for he loathed himself, loathed his present position, loathed the whole world, in fine; and he was precisely in one of those humours when the mind, bordering upon misanthropy, finds a sort of relief in solitude.

But his Royal Highness was not destined to be left long undisturbed; for Germain shortly made his appearance with the announcement that a certain Mr. Page craved an audience upon matters which he alleged to be of some importance.

"Page — Page?" murmured the prince, with mingled impatience and curiosity. "Surely I should know that name? What sort of a looking man is he, Germain?"

"About forty-five or forty-six, may it please your Royal Highness," was the reply; "thin countenance, angular features, sallow complexion, restless eyes — "

"The bagman, to be sure," ejaculated the prince. "I recollect the fellow now. But what can he want with me?"

"He says that he shall not detain your Royal Highness a minute," observed the French valet; "and that he can communicate something which it is advisable your Royal Highness should know."

"Well, I will see him," said the prince, after a moment's consideration. Then, so soon as Germain had quitted the apartment, he muttered to himself, "This man Page is a

shrewd, cunning, and active kind of a fellow. I saw enough of him on two occasions to satisfy me of that. The first was the memorable adventure of the George and Blue Boar; the other was at Stamford Manor. But what on earth can he want with me? And what can he have to communicate? "

Thus musing, the prince paced the room; and in a few minutes the ex-bagman was introduced into the royal presence. Germain withdrew; and Mr. Page, who was attired in the most fashionable style, and whose appearance and manners combined the servility of a waiter at a Bond Street hotel with the affected dandyism of a Burlington Arcade hairdresser, confounded himself in bows and scrapings as he advanced toward the prince.

" Well, Mr. Page, what do you want with me? " demanded his Royal Highness, impatiently.

" I cannot explain myself in a moment, great prince," said the ex-bagman; " and your Royal Highness must bear with me. In fact, permit me to recover my breath, which the honour and pleasure of mounting all those marble steps have quite taken away."

And Mr. Page gave a couple of long gasps as he thus spoke.

" Now, then, perhaps you will enlighten me respecting the purport of your visit? " said the prince, after waiting patiently, or rather with suppressed impatience, for upward of a minute.

" I will come to the point in a moment, may it please your Royal Highness," resumed Page. " But I think I ought to observe, by way of preface, prologue, or introduction, that I am a man of sound discretion and consummate prudence, — seeing and hearing in reality everything that takes place around me, but ostensibly neither seeing nor hearing anything more than is precisely suitable — "

" I understand you, Mr. Page," observed the prince, dryly. " In fact, you are a man of the world, and that is saying everything."

" So it is your Royal Highness, so it is," exclaimed the bowing sycophant. " On the first occasion that I had the honour to come in contact with your Royal Highness, the adventure was ludicrous enough. I took your Royal Highness for Sir Richard Stamford, and chased your Royal Highness up the Edgeware Road — "

" Well, well, sir," cried the prince, impatiently.

"Oh, your Royal Highness has since forgiven me for that affair," exclaimed Page. "You remember, great prince, on the second occasion when I had the honour to meet your Royal Highness, — at Stamford Manor, — about six weeks ago, when your Royal Highness was accompanied by the beautiful and brilliant Duchess of Devonshire — "

"How, sir? You discovered who that lady was? You knew her, then, at the time?" ejaculated the prince, angrily.

"Now do you give me credit for discretion, may it please your Royal Highness?" cried Mr. Page, in a manner humbly deprecatory of the royal wrath. "The circumstance has never passed the lips of either myself or Julia — that is to say, Mrs. Page — "

"Ah, and you knew that it was the duchess, eh?" said the prince, in a musing tone. "Well, you are certainly the most accomplished hypocrite and the most finished dissembler I ever encountered in all my life; for I could have sworn that you entertained not the faintest suspicion of who the lady really was. But, come, Mr. Page, be frank and candid, and we shall not continue the less friendly," said his Royal Highness, in a coaxing style. "Did you actually know from the very first moment who she was? Or have you discovered the secret since?"

"Of what import can the explanation possibly be to your Royal Highness," demanded Page, "seeing that I do know who the lady is, and that therefore it all comes to the same thing in the end?"

"It only matters thus far," responded the prince, in a tone of mingled hauteur and contempt, "that you seem to be beating about the bush a great deal; and I am therefore anxious to obtain an insight into what is passing in your mind, since you do not appear disposed to vouchsafe an explanation."

"Pardon me, great prince," said Page, with a low bow; "I have no sinister purpose in view. If I alluded to past incidents, it was merely to convince your Royal Highness, upon the testimony which they furnish, that I am as keen as I am trustworthy, as sharp as I am prudent, as penetrating as I am wary. And if your Royal Highness were not to be thus made acquainted with my true character, you would wonder how on earth I could possibly come to know

anything about the beautiful but unhappy Octavia Clarendon."

"Octavia Clarendon!" echoed the prince, turning pale and staggering as if struck with a sudden pang at the heart. Then, instantaneously recovering himself, as he saw the ex-bagman's keen eyes fixed searchingly upon him, he said in a tone of assumed indifference, "What have you to tell me concerning Miss Clarendon?"

"Not much, but still enough to render it necessary to be communicated to your Royal Highness," answered Mr. Page. "The long and short of the matter is that I have recently moved into a nice little house in the Edgeware Road — Paradise Villas the place is called — "

"Ah! that is where the Clarendons used to live," exclaimed the prince.

"And where the two young ladies live now," rejoined Page.

"Indeed!" cried the heir apparent, his heart bounding with joy at thus discovering the abode of Pauline. "Is it possible that the sisters have returned to their old residence?"

"It is so possible, may it please your Royal Highness," answered the sententious Mr. Page, "that I have seen them there with my own eyes, heard them with my own ears, and spoken to them with my own tongue. And what makes the thing more curious, is that Paradise Villas stands just at that part of the Edgeware Road where your Royal Highness disappeared so singularly from the yellow hackney-coach on the memorable night that I chased you under the impression of your being the Aylesbury baronet. But, ah! if the Miss Clarendons were living in Paradise Villas at the time," added Mr. Page, with a sly look, "I can now understand why your Royal Highness was visiting the neighbourhood that night, and where it was that you found a most pleasant refuge."

"And so the sisters have returned to their former home?" said the heir apparent, in a musing strain, so that all the latter portion of the speech just delivered by Mr. Page was completely lost upon his Royal Highness. "Ah, I can penetrate full easily into the motives of that sly puss, Miss Pauline," he continued to mutter to himself, as he walked to the window and then back to the fireplace, in front of which he resumed the lounging position he had just quitted.

"She thought to escape me altogether, to throw me completely out of all possible calculations respecting her whereabouts. And upon my soul, it was excellently managed! No one would have thought of looking for her in her former home. Well, my good fellow," said the prince, aloud, once more turning to Mr. Page, "and what have you got to communicate to me relative to these Miss Clarendons?"

"Your Royal Highness must be informed in the first instance," replied the ex-bagman, "that I happen to have taken a house next door to those young ladies. Now if I have a failing of my own, it is that I am inquisitive; and if I have the bump of perseverance, it assuredly is justified by the unweariedness with which I pursue any particular object that interests me. Well, the very day I entered my new house — accompanied by Mrs. Page, be it understood — I inquired who were my next-door neighbours. The answers were soon given. On my right hand dwelt the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby, lately removed from Jermyn Street, as I understood; and on my left hand were the Misses Clarendon. Well, may it please your Royal Highness, I soon discovered that my neighbour Sneaksby is a canting humbng — saving your Royal Highness's presence — who gets drunk with a red-faced hypocrite called Paxwax, and who keeps a very pretty servant-girl named Ann Jones— "

"Well, but it is about the Miss Clarendons that you wish to speak to me, I fancied?" interjected the prince, who could scarcely prevent himself from knocking Mr. Page down, so great was his impatience, and so wearied was he of the ex-bagman's circumlocutory style.

"To be sure it is," cried Page, with as much self-possession as if he had never deviated for a single moment from the point. "In the same manner that I gleaned within a few hours as much as there was to know respecting Mr. Sneaksby, did I ascertain as much as it was possible to discover about the two beautiful sisters dwelling on my left hand. So I learned that they were the daughters of Lord Holderness, who has very recently married again, that the elder, Miss Octavia, was not altogether right in her mind, that the younger, Miss Pauline, was like an angel to her unfortunate sister, and that they lived in the strictest seclusion, going nowhere and seeing no one. Well, most illustrious prince," continued Mr. Page, "I felt particularly anxious to see these

girls, and sure enough, in the evening they went out into the little bit of a garden behind the house. Both were beautiful; but one was pale and had a sad, melancholy look, while the other watched her with an earnestness of devotion that actually raised pious thoughts in my mind and made my eyes dim for a moment as if I was half-inclined to weep. However, be that as it may, there was no difficulty in discovering which was Octavia, and which was Pauline. I went out into my own garden, — the gardens at the back of these villas are only separated by a frail iron railing, bordered on each side by low evergreens; and thus it was easy for me to introduce myself in a neighbourly fashion to the sisters. Besides, I am not a man to stick at trifles when once bent upon a particular object; and, I don't know how it was, but some strange sentiment of curiosity riveted my interest upon those young ladies. I accordingly made them a low and most deferential salutation, and passed a comment upon the beauty of the evening. Octavia took no notice of me, she was plunged in the moodiest abstraction; but Pauline answered me with courtesy, though by no means in a manner which gave any encouragement for a prolongation of the discourse. But, Lord bless your Royal Highness! I am not the man to take hints when I don't choose; so I just pushed the conversation far enough to show the young lady that I wanted to get on a neighbourly sort of footing, and then I bade her good night. Well, next evening I was out in my garden again, and we conversed a little longer. Miss Pauline was not quite so distant, and she could be a sweet, amiable girl if she chose. I am sure of that."

"No doubt of it," exclaimed the prince; "but pray come to the point, and tell me in which way and to what extent all these circumstances are of importance to me."

"I shall have finished my explanations in a few minutes, may it please your Royal Highness," said Mr. Page; "and in order to get as near the end as possible, I will at once observe that after two or three evenings of neighbourly chit-chat from one garden to the other, I ventured to introduce my wife, — that is to say, the accomplished and well-looking Mrs. Page whom your Royal Highness saw at Stamford Manor — "

"I recollect perfectly," interrupted the prince, with ill-concealed impatience. "Pray proceed. You were say-

ing that you introduced Mrs. Page to the two young ladies — "

"Such was the fact," resumed the ex-bagman. "But the Honourable Miss Octavia Clarendon took little or no notice of my good lady, whereas the Honourable Miss Pauline Clarendon appeared rather pleased at the prospect of having some female companionship. And now I must inform your Royal Highness that this introduction of which I am speaking took place on the evening of the 5th instant, — to-day, you know, is the 9th — "

"Go on — go on," exclaimed the prince. "You say that the occurrence of which you are speaking took place on the 5th?" he added, more than half-suspecting what was coming.

"It was so, may it please your Royal Highness," continued Page. "And just figure to yourself that me and my wife were standing on the steps leading down from the back door of our house into our garden, while Miss Octavia and Miss Pauline were standing a few yards distant, in the gravel walk of their garden. Octavia was leaning upon Pauline's arm; and the setting sun was shining upon the auburn hair of the former and the splendid brown tresses of the latter. I thought to myself that I had never, never seen two such beautiful creatures in all my life. Well, I presented Mrs. Page to them, and, while Octavia stood gazing abstractedly upon a withering rose-bush, Pauline said some civil things to my wife. In fact, that charming Pauline is quite the lady. At first the conversation was naturally and necessarily upon ordinary topics; but all on a sudden, as the thought flashed to my wife's head, she exclaimed, 'By the bye, the young German princess that the Prince of Wales is to marry has arrived in London to-day, so the milkman told me just now.' Oh, never, never," continued Mr. Page, his air becoming all in a moment solemnly serious, "shall I forget the effect which those words produced upon Miss Octavia. A half-stifled cry burst from her lips, a deadly pallor came over her, she stared with awful wildness upon my wife, and then sank back, with a low moan, into the arms of Pauline, who had suddenly become almost as excited as herself. Well, what else could I and Mrs. Page do under such circumstances, except what we did do? And this was to scramble through the evergreens, over the low railings, into the next garden, and bestow all our attentions

on the two charming young ladies. Pauline besought us to retire and leave to herself the management of her sister; but I gave Mrs. Page a significant wink, and she accordingly said that she would not for worlds leave the dear creatures in such a plight. So we half-carried, half-led the Honourable Miss Octavia into the house, the Honourable Miss Pauline assisting us as well as she was able. We placed Octavia on the sofa in the parlour, which, by the bye, is most elegantly furnished — "

"Pause not to touch upon trifles," said the prince, in a low voice and with half-averted countenance; "but endeavour to adhere to the thread of your narrative."

"Well, please your Royal Highness," continued Mr. Page, "a most interesting scene then ensued. There was Miss Octavia raving after 'her dear prince,' 'her beloved prince,' 'her handsome George,' — your Royal Highness will pardon me — the words are hers, not mine — "

"Go on — go on," exclaimed the heir apparent, impatiently.

"All kinds of tender names did she bestow upon your Royal Highness," resumed Mr. Page; "while I and my wife were perfectly astounded at the discovery which this scene of course revealed to our comprehension. And Pauline, poor Pauline, was too much occupied in her almost wild, distracted, and despairing endeavours to appease and tranquillize her unhappy sister, — she was too much engaged, I say, in the task of soothing that frenzied mind, to take any further notice of our presence. Thus we gleaned the whole truth from poor Octavia's ravings; for the wretched young lady called you 'her betrayer,' 'her seducer,' 'the author of her ruin,' 'the father of her as yet unborn babe' — "

"She said all that, did she?" murmured the prince, in a tone that was scarcely audible; for never, never, in all his life, had he experienced the power of compunction so profoundly, so acutely as at this moment.

"She mingled the tenderest with the harshest names, the most loving epithets with the bitterest accusations," replied Page. "At one moment she invoked vengeance upon your head, at another she expressed her conviction that you would not deceive her; and finally she sank off, through sheer exhaustion, into a deep slumber, with your name hovering tenderly upon her lips. Then Pauline ap-

peared to become aware, for the first time during this lamentable scene, that my wife and myself must have learned her sister's secret; and, taking us both by the hand, she said, while tears streamed down her cheeks, 'Accident has made you acquainted with my poor sister's misfortune; I conjure you not to betray your knowledge of the cause of her sorrows.' Your Royal Highness does not require to be informed that we gave a reassuring answer; and taking leave of poor Pauline, who was overwhelmed with grief, we returned into our own house to discuss all we had seen and heard."

"Have you anything more to communicate to me, Mr. Page?" inquired the prince.

"To be sure," ejaculated that mercurially brisk and bustling individual. "I am now coming to the very cream of the whole matter, — the point relative to which it is most imperatively necessary for your Royal Highness to be duly warned — "

"Warned?" echoed the heir apparent, recovering somewhat of his dignified hauteur and casting an almost stern glance upon the ex-bagman. "What danger, sir, can possibly threaten me from that quarter? If I made Miss Clarendon my mistress, I also made her father a peer," he continued, the evanescent remorse which had been excited in his soul now rapidly losing its tensity and indeed relapsing into the cold heartlessness that was habitual with him. "But continue, sir, the observations you have to make."

"I shall not detain your Royal Highness much longer," resumed Mr. Page, now for the first time entertaining a fear that he was a little too prolix. "The incident which I have just related occurred on the 5th; the 6th passed without the young ladies reappearing in the garden, but I sent my wife to make inquiries. She only saw the servant; and the answer was that Miss Octavia continued poorly, and that Miss Pauline was unable to leave her. The same on the 7th. But on the 8th, which was yesterday, may it please your Royal Highness — "

"I recollect the date well," cried the prince, in an irrepressible paroxysm of bitterness as he thought of his wedding-day. "Go on, Mr. Page; what occurred yesterday?" he demanded in a more conciliatory tone.

"It was last evening, may it please your Royal Highness," resumed the ex-bagman. "Soon after dusk, the two sisters

went forth into their little garden. Octavia was leaning upon Pauline's arm. Through the deepening gloom of the evening, the former resembled a drooping Muse breathing in gentle accents the history of her sorrows to the ear of a sister demigoddess. For she was speaking in the lowest tone, and yet with a continuousness which showed how earnest were her words; and as I happened to be seated at the time in a little arbour of evergreens at the bottom of my garden, I did not think it necessary to disturb the poor young ladies by letting them know that I was near. I accordingly remained perfectly still; and of course if I did overhear anything that passed between them, it was not my fault. Fancying themselves to be entirely alone, they were discoursing unreservedly, although in a very low voice. Octavia was declaring her resolve to proceed to Carlton House, demand an interview with your Royal Highness, and ascertain your intentions from your own lips. These views she enunciated in a strain which was so collected and rational, that I fancied she must have altogether recovered the full use of her reason. It was evident that Pauline entertained the same idea; for she began to argue with her sister just as one sane person addresses another. She represented the impropriety as well as the inutility of the proposed step; but Octavia was immovably wedded to her design. The discussion was continued with a calm earnestness on both sides for upwards of a quarter of an hour; and not once during that interval did Octavia give the slightest proof of mental alienation. Nevertheless, she persevered in her resolve to seek an interview with your Royal Highness; and Pauline, evidently becoming alarmed at the determination to which her mind had settled down, and no doubt presuming too much upon its extreme apparent calmness, broke to her the truth, the tremendous truth, that your marriage with her Royal Highness the Princess Caroline was fixed to take place that very evening. Then, all in a moment, from the lips of Octavia burst the wildest of cries, and, turning abruptly away from her sister, she fled into the house, exclaiming, 'Give me my cloak, my bonnet, and let me depart to claim my husband, whom a foreign rival is taking away from me!' Your Royal Highness will forgive me if I thus unceremoniously and frankly repeat the very words which the poor creature uttered — "

"You need make no apology, Mr. Page," exclaimed the prince, whose thoughts were now divided between compunctious feelings on behalf of Octavia and licentious hopes of possessing Pauline. "Pray continue, and hesitate not to tell me everything just as it occurred."

"The frenzied shriek of wildest anguish which thrilled from the lips of Octavia," resumed Page, "was echoed by one of the tensest alarm on the part of Pauline; and the whole neighbourhood would have been frightened out of its seven senses had not nearly every one gone into town to see the illuminations in honour of your Royal Highness's marriage. But my wife was at home, and I was in the arbour as I have already explained; and while Mrs. Page was rushing down the steps in one direction, I was dashing through the evergreens in another. Over the iron railings once more, into our neighbours' garden we sped, and this time Miss Pauline was right glad of our presence; for poor Octavia had gone raving, raging, furiously mad, and it was as much as all three of us could do to hold her down. At one instant she threatened to lay violent hands upon herself, at another she — But this may amount to treason — "

"Speak out, man, and fear nothing!" exclaimed the prince. "I suppose she menaced my life as well as her own?"

"Just so, may it please your Royal Highness," responded Page.

"It does not please me at all," observed the prince, for a moment suffering his features to relax into a smile at the oddness of that conjuncture of phrases. "But what was the result of this lamentable relapse on Miss Clarendon's part?"

"Me and my wife remained along with Miss Pauline until two o'clock this morning," replied Page; "and never shall I forget the awful paroxysms of anguish and outbursts of feeling which we were compelled to witness. And poor Miss Pauline herself — Ah! that young lady possesses an excellent heart — "

"And when you left Octavia at two this morning?" demanded the prince, abruptly.

"She had sunk into a profound sleep, through sheer exhaustion," was the answer; "but her last words were fraught with terrible menace toward your Royal Highness. And now, perhaps, the object of my intrusion upon the time

and notice of your Royal Highness may be sufficiently understood, if not adequately explained — "

"You think that I entertain any fears of a poor maniac girl?" said the prince, vainly endeavouring to conceal his uneasiness.

"I do not suppose that your Royal Highness apprehends actual violence," Page hastened to observe; "because I am well aware that Miss Octavia Clarendon, if she presented herself at Carlton House, would not be allowed to push her way farther than the hall. But she might nevertheless create such a disturbance, proclaim so many disagreeable things — "

"Yes, that is indeed to be feared," exclaimed the prince. "Of course her sister will not encourage her in this wild scheme of demanding an interview with me — "

"On the contrary. I have already assured your Royal Highness that Miss Pauline did everything she could to reason her sister out of the notion," said Mr. Page. "But what is she to do with a mad girl?"

"What would you do with her?" demanded the prince, perceiving some sinister meaning in the look which the ex-bagman fixed upon him.

"I would have her locked up in a lunatic asylum," was the prompt answer; and he looked harder and more significantly still at the heir apparent.

"But do you really fancy that she is so very dangerous?" he inquired, with evident irresolution how to act.

"I am certain, great prince," responded Page, "that the very first opportunity she has, Octavia will break away from her sister's care; and, under the inspiration of her frenzied ideas, she will not only seek Carlton House, but her history will be proclaimed to all who may be near enough to listen."

"This must not take place, Mr. Page," said the prince. Then, after walking once or twice up and down the room, he suddenly stopped short within a yard of the ex-bagman, on whom he cast a look as if he meant to read him through and through.

"I am staunch, discreet, faithful," observed Page, perceiving and understanding that glance so penetrating and so searching.

"But will you take this business in hand? Will you

guarantee to remove Octavia Clarendon to some place of security?" demanded the prince.

"I will, your Royal Highness," was the answer.

"And your wife — is she as trustworthy as yourself?"

"There's not a pin's point between us in that respect."

"Then let her so insinuate herself into the confidence of Pauline — of Pauline, mind," observed the prince, in a low deep tone — "that the young maiden will learn to look upon her as a sincere friend in whom the most implicit trust is to be placed. Pauline must not know, therefore, that you have anything to do with the removal of Octavia — "

"Leave it all to me, illustrious prince," ejaculated Page. "Both affairs shall be managed to your satisfaction. I understand what your Royal Highness means with regard to Pauline. Well, it shows the exquisite taste of your Royal Highness — In short, Pauline shall be yours," he added, with a resolute emphasis and a significant look.

"Good! we understand each other," said the prince. "And now let me hear your views relative to reward, for I scarcely think that a man in an easy position of life as you are will be satisfied with mere lucre."

"Your Royal Highness has judged me accurately," exclaimed Mr. Page. Then, after a little hesitation, he observed, "I presume that a few honours and titles — even so low as that of knight — will be conferred shortly in commemoration of your Royal Highness's nuptials."

"Precisely so," returned the prince, with difficulty subduing a violent inclination to burst out laughing in the ex-bagman's face. "Should you like to be a knight, Mr. Page?"

"The distinction would just suit me to a nicety," was the complaisant response; "and I flatter myself that Mrs. P. would not disgrace it."

"Then let this understanding be established between us," exclaimed the prince: "that when Octavia Clarendon shall have been placed in restraint and Pauline Clarendon delivered over to my arms, your shoulder is to receive the accolade of knighthood."

"I shall soon win the honour thus graciously guaranteed by your Royal Highness," said Mr. Page.

He then made a low bow and took his departure, well pleased with the promise which had resulted from his visit to Carlton House.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE INVALID NOBLEMAN AND HIS UNKNOWN NURSE

THE clock — that clock with its chimes which had led Florimel to discover where he was — had just begun to strike as the young nobleman awoke. He lay still to count the strokes of the harmonious bell; and he reckoned twelve.

"Twelve," he repeated in an undertone. "But is it twelve at noon or twelve at night?" he asked, speaking to himself under the momentary impression that he was alone.

"Noon, my dearest Gabriel, high noon by the sun," was the immediate response murmuringly given in that well-known dulcet sound that proved so welcome to his ear; and at the same moment he felt her form leaning across his chest, her glowing cheek met his, and her mouth, rich in its moist lubricity, was pressed to his own lips.

"Noon, dearest, noon?" he repeated, so soon as he recovered the breath which that long luxurious kiss took away for upwards of a minute; "and have I slept, then, uninterruptedly since seven o'clock last evening? and that, too, after having lain ill for three days?"

"It is precisely because you were so very, very ill for those three days that a good long interval of slumber was necessary to restore your exhausted strength," answered the Unknown. "During that interval of three days you were sometimes raving in delirium, sometimes plunged into a trance whence I despaired of ever awaking you. You had received a violent blow, which produced concussion of the brain, but I will at once relieve you from any apprehension relative to the beauty of your countenance, my Gabriel, by assuring you that the wound on your forehead is comparatively slight and will leave no scar."

Thus speaking, in a voice full of concentrated tenderness,

the Unknown again bent over the invalid and lavished upon him the softest, sweetest, and most delicious caresses, but rather as a proof of love than to excite his passions at that moment.

"Thanks, a thousand thanks, for the tender interest you exhibit in my behalf," murmured Florimel. "And during those three days you have been my nurse?" he inquired, in a tone of deep feeling.

"I have scarcely ever left you for a single moment, Gabriel," was the soft and tremulous reply; "and had it not been for me, you would have slept with Death. Ah! it was cruel, cruel in the extreme on the part of Lady Bellenden to send you away from her house in a state of insensibility and without even summoning a surgeon to examine your ailment. But she is a prude, a veritable prude, one of your unfeeling sanctimonious ones, who would sooner be thought heartless altogether than too easy in making allowances for the follies, errors, and weaknesses of their fellow creatures."

"Then the marchioness thrust me ignominiously forth from her dwelling?" said Lord Florimel. "Well, I am free to confess that I deserved such treatment on her part; for it was assuredly a sovereign insult for me to enter her presence in female disguise — But perhaps you know nothing of the circumstances, my charmer?" exclaimed the young nobleman, suddenly recollecting himself.

"What I did not glean from Lady Bellenden's servants, I could pretty well conjecture from beholding you in the disguise of a female," said the Unknown. "Thus it happened: I was passing by Bellenden Priory in my barouche, when I saw at the gate a carriage which, although a plain one, I instantaneously recognized as belonging to my friends the Desboroughs. Wishing to see the Countess of Desborough, I ordered my carriage to stop while I made inquiries whether it was her ladyship who was then paying a visit to the priory. The domestics replied in the affirmative; and I was just alighting from my own carriage, when several servants came forth from the gate, bearing amongst them what appeared to be the inanimate form of a female. The foremost domestic instantaneously cried out to the footman in attendance upon Lady Desborough's carriage, 'Here! you are to drive quick to Lord Florimel's, Piccadilly, and then return to fetch the countess.' While thus speaking the

domestic opened the carriage door and was about to have you thrust ruthlessly in, all insensible as you were, when I sprang forward at the mention of your name. Yes, it was indeed you, you, my own handsome, well-beloved Gabriel! Reckless of what the servants might think, and not even pausing to reflect or ascertain whether they knew who you were or fancied you were really a lady, I claimed you as a cousin. Cousin, you know, applies to either sex; and so I could not be wrong. You were forthwith thrust into my carriage instead of Lady Desborough's, — 'twas all the work of an instant, — and, with your dear head pillowed on my bosom, you were whirled hither in a state of continued unconsciousness. Now you know all, Gabriel, except that I have been very unhappy on your account," added the invisible but not impalpable siren, her voice sinking into accents of the tenderest pathos. "But, thank Heaven! you are beyond all danger now. Indeed, you are convalescent, and I am truly happy once more."

"Ah! my dearest friend, my kind-hearted, excellent, adorable nurse," exclaimed Florimel, as he drew the lady toward him, "how deep is the debt of gratitude which I owe you! The proofs of sincere and disinterested affection which you have given me in this instance have touched me profoundly — oh, profoundly, profoundly," he added, with a deliberate emphasis, as he strained to his breast that glowing form which he had caught in his arms.

We need hardly repeat that the chamber was as dark as if there were no windows at all. The lady was standing by the bedside; she was clad in a loose vesture, — a mere morning wrapper negligently fastened at the waist with a band. Her feet were thrust into slippers; her hair was flowing dishevelled over her shoulders. Even in the midst of that utter darkness did a species of knowledge of her superb charms glimmer up intuitively, and expand into a thrilling conviction, in the soul of Lord Florimel, as he threw his arms around her neck and held her in a bending posture over him, with her bosom heaving against his chest, her cheek pillowed upon his own, and their lips meeting in frequent kisses.

Not that he could form any positive idea of the actual appearance of his unknown charmer, much less be enabled to recognize her should they meet hereafter in the public

street. He knew not, for instance, the colour of her hair, the hue of her eyes, or the expression of her countenance; and thus the principal indications, indeed the main guides, to the recognition of an individual, were entirely wanting. But that she was handsome, he had no doubt; his hand had already, during their different interviews, passed a dozen times over her features, and acquired the certainty that such was the fact. That she was splendidly formed was even still more satisfactorily ascertained, — the sculptural richness, the fine contours, and the gentle inflections of the figure, being more easily traced by the sense of touch only, than the configuration of the countenance. Yes, assuredly she was handsome, — gloriously handsome, — and grandly formed, with Diana-like proportions; and, moreover, there emanated from her whole person, as it were, a perfume of love and an effluence of soft voluptuousness which intoxicated the sense, while the suavity of her manner and the tender music of her voice stole with the engrossing power of an æsthetic rapture upon the spirit.

Ah! dangerous, dangerous woman; even in the Cimmerian darkness wherewith she enveloped herself, but in the midst of which the imagination still depicted her glowing with light and brilliant as a goddess, did she exercise a power too well calculated to enslave the heart around which she cast her spells.

And as she lay thus half-reclining upon the breast of her noble young paramour, the thought gradually began to take birth and expand in his imagination, to the effect that such as this splendid Unknown seemed to be, the Marchioness of Bellenden doubtless must be. In a word, Florimel began to compare the charms which were now in such close and exciting contact relative to himself with those which his fancy conjectured might be concealed beneath the widow's weeds worn by the marchioness. The Unknown was tall and slightly inclined to embonpoint, with a bust of the most voluptuous proportions; so was the marchioness. The Unknown was assuredly possessed of splendid teeth; so was the marchioness. Ah! but why does Florimel pause here? Why does the comparison, or rather the attempt at identification, abruptly stop? Because he is suddenly struck by the folly of attempting to push the task any farther, — inasmuch as although he knows the colour of

Lady Bellenden's hair and eyes, the precise hue of her lips, the tint of her complexion, and the expression of her countenance, yet he is utterly ignorant on all those points in respect to the Unknown.

And there were so many women of splendid forms, tall stature, and luxuriant charms in the circle of his acquaintance, that because the Unknown was of that description of beauty, he might just as well identify her with the Duchess of Devonshire, or Mrs. Harvey Aston, or the Countess of Jersey, or even the Princess Sophia, or the Princess Amelia, or Lady Letitia Lade, — he might as well identify his Unknown with any one of these, we say, as with the Marchioness of Bellenden.

Besides, the hypothesis was contradicted by fifty other circumstances. Was it probable that a woman of the strictest seclusion and of eternal widowhood was the visitress at masquerades? Was it possible that the serene, tranquil and benevolent recluse was the lascivious divinity of that voluptuous boudoir? Could Lady Bellenden entertain any serious notion of marrying him, if he were so inclined? And how could she possibly exercise the slightest influence over that lawsuit which threatened him with ruin? No, no; it was preposterous. The attempt to identify the pure-minded, solitude-loving, even prudish marchioness with the Unknown whose passions were so frenetic and whose conduct was so incomprehensible, — such an attempt, we say, Lord Florimel suddenly abandoned as being ridiculous to a degree.

"I can guess what is passing in your mind, you silly fellow," whispered the Unknown, after a pause of a few minutes; and her voice, soft and musical, was playfully bantering and full of good-humoured archness.

"Of what was I thinking, dearest?" inquired Florimel, now struck by the additional fact that the voice of his charmer was far more dulcet, more tender, and more harmonious than that of the Marchioness of Bellenden.

"You are seeking to establish my identity with some one of your female acquaintances," responded the Unknown; "you are racking your brain to discover whose personal appearance and attributes, so far as you know them, would exactly correspond with mine, so far as you can form an idea of them. Now am I not right, Gabriel? And if right, is not this a little piece of treachery on your part, — rendered

less justifiable, too, by the devotedness with which I have tended you during your really dangerous illness? "

"Oh, pardon, pardon me, my invaluable friend," exclaimed the young nobleman, touched to his very heart's core by the plaintive accents which her voice assumed as she gave utterance to those interrogative remonstrances. "I am unworthy of all the tenderness you have lavished upon me, — all the love which you have shown so many times toward me. Yes, I confess that I was allowing my imagination to run riot into the realms of conjecture and seek to discover the mystery of your identification. It was indeed wrong, unworthy of myself, unjust, ungenerous, ungrateful toward you. But, oh, can you be surprised, even though you may feel hurt and angry — "

"I am no longer hurt, and not for a moment was I angry, Gabriel," interrupted the lady, in her softest tones; and she silenced with the fondest kisses the reply he was about to make. "There let us say no more upon the subject, unless it be that you will permit me to assure you how impossible it is for you to discover my secret until the day and the hour shall come when I may choose to reveal it. It is a mystery which defies all your power of penetration, and which remains proof against all possible conjecture. When you are to see the veil torn aside, and whether you ever shall, depend entirely upon yourself. As my husband alone can you obtain the gratification of your curiosity in that respect; otherwise, the secret goes with me to the tomb. That I am worthy of becoming your wife, so far as beauty, accomplishments, social position, and fortune are concerned I may assert without vanity; but whether, — oh! whether you entertain such misgivings relative to my moral character — "

And she lowered her voice until it was lost in the billing murmurs of the kisses which she lavished upon him and in which she thus purposely drowned it.

"My adored friend, my beauteous Unknown, my kind, generous, and affectionate nurse," exclaimed Florimel, wrapped in a perfect enthusiasm of devotedness and gratitude toward the woman who appeared to make him the idol of her own illimitable fondness, "I once more demand your pardon for having, though merely in imagination, endeavoured to penetrate your secret. I love you, oh! be assured that I love you; and I would sooner kill myself than cause you a

moment's pain. Dear friend, how affectionate are your caresses, how tender your words toward me! How can I evince my gratitude for so much love on your part? Ah! I feel that sooner than seek to penetrate the mystery wherewith it suits thee to surround thyself, it would be worthier far were I to assist thee to the utmost of my power to maintain thy secret until the time shall come when thou mayst reveal it. Tell me, then, my charmer, tell me, my goddess of love in human shape, what can I do to satisfy thee of my gratitude? What course can I adopt to deserve thy good opinion and merit thine unalterable friendship?"

"I will tell you, my Gabriel, what you must do to convince me of the sincerity of all that you have been telling me," said the siren stranger, pressing still more closely to his bosom and his cheek as she thus bent over him; "you must leave London for a few weeks —"

"Leave London!" ejaculated the young nobleman, now vividly reminded of the fact that all his thoughts had recently been fixed on the discovery of Pauline's place of abode, and that the very disguise which had led to his present invalid condition had been assumed in order to assist him in the prosecution of that object.

"There!" ejaculated the Unknown, with an accent of vexation, and partially disengaging herself from his embrace, "I feared — I dreaded lest I should be asking too much. Oh, you have ties binding you to London, — ties which are insuperable —"

"Be not offended with me, dearest," exclaimed Florimel, folding her once more in his arms with an enthusiastic warmth, for the effluence of her charms and the fascinations of her language and manner stole upon him with a power against which he had neither the moral nor physical courage to offer any resistance.

"Oh, I am not offended with you, Gabriel," she murmured, in a tone of the deepest pathos; "but I fear, I know, I am confidant that you do not love me! You regard me only as an occasional playmate for voluptuous dalliance, — the being who from time to time affords you a pleasing variety in your pursuit of amorous enjoyments. But, oh, it is not thus that I wish to be loved — it is not in this light that I thought you could regard me!"

And Florimel felt his cheek become moist with the

tears that fell from the lady's eyes as she still bent over him.

"Ah, wretch that I am thus to torture you!" he cried, no longer master of himself. "After all your goodness toward me, I am a demon of cruelty —"

"No, no; 'tis I who expect and exact too much," murmured the Unknown, in a voice tremulous with emotion. "We will separate, Gabriel, separate, never to meet again —"

"By Heaven, this shall not be!" ejaculated the nobleman, whose feelings were worked up to such a pitch that he was prepared to make any sacrifice and consummate any deed of rashness or folly for the sake of the mysterious enchantress who had acquired and established such an immense influence over his soul. "Tell me what you demand of me, dearest one, and I swear to accomplish your wishes," he cried, in a voice full of delirious fervour and wild enthusiasm.

"Ah! now you are my own dear, dear Gabriel once more," whispered the lady, bestowing upon him the tenderest caresses at the same time; "and never, never shall you repent the proof of love and affection which you thus give me."

"Henceforth you shall be all on earth to me, my invisible but cherished angel," cried the infatuated young man. "Let us think not of the absurd shackles of marriage, but be you my mistress, the joy of my heart, bound to me by the tenderest of ties, as I shall remain bound to you by the same eternal bonds."

"Oh, now you are dictating terms to me," exclaimed the lady, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, but the accents of which were full of fondness; "whereas 'tis for me to prescribe certain conditions to you, — at least if the promises which you ere now made me be sincere —"

"Name your conditions, my well-beloved," interrupted Florimel, his voice laden with the gush of enthusiastic feelings that poured forth from his soul as he strained the warm, glowing, palpitating form of that splendid creature more closely still to his own breast; "dictate your terms, and I swear by all that is sincerest, and sweetest, and holiest in the experience of love to obey you as if you were my guardian angel, — the arbitress of my destinies. Say, then, what do you require of me? That I should leave London for a few weeks —"

"Yes, and that you should repair to some distant town, some pleasant watering-place, for instance, at which you must remain to ponder over all I have ever said to you, either on this occasion of our being together or when we met last — "

"Ah! you spoke to me then of many strange things," whispered Florimel.

"And strange things can I perform also, my well-beloved," responded the lady, accompanying the assurance with the tenderest caresses, "if you will only place implicit confidence in me and act in accordance with my dictates. Oh, Gabriel, dear Gabriel, I can save you — save you, if I choose, from you know not how much adversity!" she exclaimed, in a tone of enthusiasm, suddenly gushing forth with all the accents of a fervid and unmistakable sincerity.

"Command me — order me, as thou wilt, my guardian genius! — for such shall I henceforth consider thee, and such wilt thou become in respect to my destinies," cried the infatuated young nobleman, growing each instant more and more enslaved to a despotism that was as delicious as it was incomprehensible. Then, as if he suddenly felt all the folly of thus yielding himself up to an unknown tyrant, albeit the chains which she cast upon him were of silk and of flowers, he exclaimed, "Oh, whence is derived that power of fascination and of enchantment which thou hast learned to wield over me with such irresistible success? 'Tis the effluence of a wondrous beauty the glory of which I am as yet only permitted to imagine, but in the voluptuousness of which I have revelled again and again. Oh, tell me then, adored one, what shall thy slave do to testify his devotion? Whither shall he repair? When shall he take his departure from this great city? And how long shall he remain away? Give me thy commands upon all these points, my guardian angel, my unknown goddess, my unseen divinity, and thou shalt be obeyed to the very letter, — ay, to the very letter, as I have a soul to be saved!"

"You solemnly, sacredly, inviolably swear to all this?" murmured the lady, in a tone of subdued ecstasy and triumph. "Let me feel you place your hand upon your heart and take the most serious of oaths to perform your promise."

"There! now are you content, my angel?" asked Florimel, when he had done as he was directed.

"Yes, and I love you more, oh, ten thousand times more than ever!" exclaimed the Unknown, embracing him with rapture. "The conditions I impose upon you, my Gabriel, are these: that when night comes you suffer yourself to be placed in my carriage, which will take you to Dover, where you will fix your abode for a few weeks. You can thence write to your own mansion in Piccadilly, ordering such servants as you may choose to select for the purpose to follow you to that seaport; and there you will remain for six weeks without returning to the metropolis. Now, do you repent of the promise you have given me and the oath you have taken?"

"No, no, I do not repent," exclaimed the infatuated young nobleman. "But shall I be compelled to live in solitude at Dover? Shall I not be enabled to press you in my arms during an interval which, without you, will seem long and tedious indeed?"

"Oh, leave all that to me, my Gabriel!" returned the impassioned woman, straining him again and again to her heaving, glowing, throbbing bosom, and lavishing upon him those caresses which were so full of rapture, ecstasy, and voluptuousness. "You must ask me no more questions, Gabriel; but perhaps you will be better pleased with all that may take place than you can now possibly anticipate. Is our bargain complete? Is our compact settled?"

"It is — it is, my angel!" cried the young nobleman; "and thus — and thus — and thus do I ratify it," he added, accompanying each fervid ejaculation with as warm a kiss impressed upon the moist lips that sought his own.

We need not dwell longer upon this scene. Suffice it to say that the Unknown Lady remained with her infatuated paramour for another hour, until he sank off into a delicious slumber. She then rose from the armchair in which she had seated herself while he was sinking into that refreshing sleep that stole gradually upon him; and on quitting the room she carefully locked the door behind her, taking the key from the lock so that no one could possibly enter the chamber from without.

Then a profound silence reigned in that apartment, — a silence that was broken only by the low and regular respiration of the sleeping nobleman.

But gradually a slight rustling of the drapery hanging

around the bed and sweeping the floor broke gently and almost imperceptibly upon that stillness; and some one crept with infinite caution from beneath the couch. Then the individual paused, listened, and held his breath, as if it were an inanimate spectre from the grave. The young nobleman continued to sleep on profoundly — uninterruptedly; and the intruder, satisfied that this was the case, took a pair of scissors from his pocket, and cut off a small piece of the curtains surrounding the bed. He then felt his way in the same cautious, noiseless manner toward the window, and from the hangings drawn so closely over the shutters, he cut another fragment with his scissors. Again he paused, again he listened, and he acquired the certainty that Lord Florimel was steeped in the Lethean sweets of a profound slumber.

The intruder now took from about his person several skeleton-keys, which he tried one after another in the lock of the door of the chamber. This proceeding he conducted with the same caution which he had hitherto observed, stopping frequently and holding his breath to listen whether the sleeping nobleman had been disturbed. But Florimel's slumber was proof against the low sounds of the keys grating in the lock; and at length the intruder succeeded in opening the door. He peeped forth; the coast was clear, and, carefully fastening the door behind him, he entered the passage, which was now lighted by the sunbeams that flowed through a window over the staircase. Descending that staircase, the intruder opened the door at the foot and entered the garden. Plunging into an avenue of evergreens, he passed rapidly and unobserved along the shaded walk toward the gate, whence he issued without encountering a soul to notice or question him.

When night came, Lord Florimel awoke to find the Unknown Lady seated in the armchair by his side; and, in the profound darkness of that chamber, but assisted by the hands of the siren, he put on the male apparel which her thoughtful care provided for him. This toilet was interrupted by many ardent caresses; but at length it was completed; and, a bandage having been placed over Lord Florimel's eyes, he was led forth by his companion from the boudoir of love, and mystery, and darkness.

The stairs were descended, the garden was traversed, the gate was passed, and into the carriage which was waiting

did Lord Florimel mount, still guided by the Unknown. Hasty farewells were whispered between them; the door was closed, and the vehicle rolled rapidly away.

For some minutes did the young nobleman remain plunged in the reflections which this new phase in his life was so well calculated to excite; then, taking off the bandage, he found, as he had expected, that the blinds of the carriage were drawn up and immovable. In another quarter of an hour the vehicle stopped, and the tall footman, opening the door, unfastened the blinds and lowered them. Florimel looked forth; and he at once recognized the neighbourhood where his halt took place, for the towers of Westminster Abbey were rearing their gray summits close by, in the pure moonbeams; and the arching rows of lamps marked with their tracery of glimmering light the curved viaduct of Westminster Bridge.

The operation of unfastening and lowering the blinds only occupied a couple of minutes; and as the bell of the Abbey proclaimed the hour of eleven the carriage rolled rapidly along over the bridge.

"My God! what have I done?" murmured Florimel to himself, a sudden pang of remorse now inflicting upon his heart a torture like the stab of a poniard. "I have abandoned my Pauline, I have renounced that angel for a being whom I do not know. Alas! alas! I have been guilty of the most tremendous imprudence, — ay, and of the blackest perfidy toward Pauline!"

Then, covering his face with his hands, Lord Florimel remained for upwards of five minutes in the deepest reverie, — a reverie in which, though his body was as motionless as a statue, his mind was travelling along the beaten road of the past with the speed of a race-horse. All the enormous folly of which he had been guilty in surrendering himself up to the influence of the unknown siren now developed itself with an effect too sombre to be positively startling, too darkly gloomy to be actually intense or thrilling; but a sorrow, profound as a consternation and black as despair, stole upon him, and he felt like a man who by one single false step has ruined a brilliant position or undermined a colossal fortune.

Vainly did he endeavour to console himself — or rather to justify his own treachery toward Pauline — by the re-

flection that she had of her own accord put an end to everything between them; again and again would recur the crushing and overwhelming conviction that, if he really loved her, it was his duty to persevere in finding her out and demanding an explanation of the past. Again and again, too, was the fact forced upon his contemplation that she loved him, and that her cruelty would not endure for ever. But now he had resigned her, — resigned that being so beautiful and so charming; he had renounced her, and for the sake of a stranger.

These were the thoughts which now overhung his mind in the shape of the darkest, gloomiest, most sombre shadows; and he longed to order the carriage to stop, that he might leap forth and retrace his way homeward as rapidly as he could. But why did he not do so? Why did he remain voiceless and motionless upon the downy cushion of that carriage? Because, as the reader has already seen on more occasions than one, he lacked that moral courage which could alone arouse him to the point of energy adequate to sustain an effectual struggle against the influences which were urging him on in his career of folly; and moreover the spell of the siren's fascinations was still upon him. All the mystery by which she was surrounded, the power which she asserted over his own fortunes, either to save them from destruction or precipitate their ruin, and then, the impression which her wanton disposition had produced upon his own ardent temperament, together with the solemn promise which he had given to pay implicit obedience to her commands and obey her injunctions, — all these circumstances, combined with a burning curiosity to solve the enigma of which she was the charming but dangerous object, exercised upon the mind of the young nobleman an influence which clung to him like the moist garment of Dejanira every time he endeavoured to throw it off.

"No! I must accomplish my destiny — I must not essay any longer to battle against it," he suddenly exclaimed aloud, as he withdrew his hands from his face and woke up from his painful reverie. "Whatever be the results, I must pursue this adventure to the end. The Unknown offers to save me from ruin if I will marry her. 'Make me your wife,' she said, 'and I will stifle the lawsuit which otherwise must inevitably destroy you in respect to fortune and despoil you of rank.'

Well, she loves me; and perhaps I may yet induce her to save me, even without becoming her husband. Then, Pauline, my own sweet Pauline, I may find thee out, throw myself at thy feet, and make my peace with thee, my angel and my beauty!"

Thus mused Lord Florimel now; and therefore the carriage continued to be whirled along the Kentish Road without a word of counter-order from his lips.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE MANIACS

A WEEK had elapsed since James Melmoth awoke to the consciousness that he was undergoing the treatment of a lunatic.

He was in a stone dungeon, with a massive arched roof, and so far open in front that instead of having any masonry on that side, it was separated by a stout iron grating from a long narrow passage. It therefore resembled the den of a wild beast. There were six of these places all in a row; and they were denominated the mad cells.

In the middle of the iron gate set in the grating was a small wicket about a foot square, and which was used for introducing the food of those prisoners who were too violent and dangerous for the keeper to enter their dens. Each cell contained an iron bedstead screwed down to the stone pavement; and the bedding was of the strongest and coarsest material. No table, no chair, no article of furniture, in fine, save the iron bed, appeared in either of those cells. The light was admitted from narrow windows in the wall of the passage; and in winter time the place was warmed by means of a fire at the end of that stone corridor.

Such were the mad cells of the old workhouse of which we are writing; and it was in one of those accursed dens that James Melmoth had now been kept a prisoner for seven days.

The reader will remember that the unfortunate man had leaped from his couch in the infirmary to make an attack upon Mr. Thurston, and that he had fallen with a violence which deprived him of his senses. His restoration to life was followed by a terrible delirium in which he had given utterance to the most awful ravings, and had acted in a

manner compelling the surgeon to have him put under restraint. He was therefore lodged in one of the mad cells; and hence it was that when he awoke to consciousness he found himself held in the bondage of a tight-fitting vesture, the legs of the trousers being fastened to the mattress, and the sleeves of the jacket sewn to the sides of that garment itself.

After long communing with himself, Melmoth was enabled to look his position clearly in the face. He saw that so long as he was considered to be a madman, there was no danger of his being handed over to the grasp of criminal justice for the violation of the churchyard, — a horror from which his mind, in its calm and lucid moments, recoiled with inexpressible loathing. But if, on the other hand, his conduct afforded proof of a recovered sanity, he would assuredly be transferred from the mad cell of the workhouse to the dungeon of a felon's gaol.

It was therefore necessary that he should at least simulate a mental alienation which had in reality ceased to exist. But then there was the consideration, how was he to get released from the bondage in which his limbs were confined? The task was a difficult one; for, in order to accomplish his aims, he must affect just so much madness as would save him from being handed over to the criminal law, and yet he must exhibit a sufficient degree of tractability to induce the surgeon to emancipate him from the strait-jacket.

This was the astute policy upon which James Melmoth resolved; and it succeeded so far that the medical attendant ordered him to be released from the bondage in which his limbs were confined. But still he remained a captive in that dreadful cell; and it was evident from the questions put to him by the keeper, the master of the workhouse, and the surgeon himself, that they more than half-suspected his gloomy manner and eccentric observations to be the assumed semblance of madness. Moreover, Melmoth, who was ever on the alert to catch anything that fell from the lips of those authorities who visited him, overheard certain remarks between the surgeon and the keeper which convinced him that his duplicity was rapidly becoming more and more transparent; and he shuddered every time a step approached his cell, for fear that the officers of justice were coming to bear him away to prison.

His state of mind was horrible in the extreme. In the neighbouring cells there were real maniacs, — men whose brain adversity had touched in the first instance, and whom the tyranny of the workhouse goaded to insanity altogether. The fiendlike yells, the demoniac cries, the appalling lamentations, the bitter weeping, the piteous moaning, and the frightful language, which exhibited the different phases of mental alienation on the part of those unhappy beings, rendered the day torturing to a degree and the night positively hideous. Melmoth, in fact, felt that if he were to remain long in such a shocking vicinage, he should really end by going mad himself.

And thus a week had passed; and at the expiration of this time, the miserable man perceived that there were moments when his own brain was reeling, not under the influence of that appalling monomania which had driven him, even against his will, to the desecration of the churchyard, but with another and different species of mental perturbation. His own wretched thoughts were poignant, and tense, and harrowing enough to drive him crazy; and when to their bitterness, and anguish, and despair were superadded all the horrors of the maniac revels on his right and his left, the wonder was not that he should have felt his own brain gradually affected, but that the equilibrium of his reason should have survived even for a single day the awful shock of such tremendous influences.

Nevertheless, as we have stated, a week passed, and during this interval the poor wretch retained his reason so well that he was even enabled and compelled to affect madness in order to save himself from a doom more dreaded than his present condition. But he began to feel that this state of things could not possibly last: his assumed insanity was suspected, even while it was verging into the dire reality of the terrible affliction. What could he do? — to remain there was to court the condition of the raving lunatics who were writhing, yelling, roaring, weeping, and lamenting in the other cells; and to give up playing the part of an insane person was to rush headlong into all the infamy and intolerable disgrace attendant upon a trial at the Old Bailey as a desecrator of the resting-places of the dead.

It was in the evening of the seventh day, the sun had set, and, as no lamp burned in the stone passage, the mad cells

were all as dark as pitch. Melmoth was seated upon his bed, thinking of his dead wife whose corpse he had torn up from the grave, thinking of the care with which he had reconsigned it to the grave, thinking also of his poor children whom he had last seen in the infirmary, but concerning whom he had not dared ask a single question since he had become an inmate of that barred den, — of all these subjects was he thinking, while the train of his ideas was interwoven with other threads of harrowing reminiscences, and while the yells and cries of the neighbouring maniacs were ringing like a thousand bells through his wildering brain.

Presently a light flashed in at the end of the passage, footsteps advanced, and Melmoth, anxious to escape those searching questions which the authorities of the place were wont to put to him in order to probe the real state of his mind, threw himself softly back upon the bed and pretended to be wrapped in a profound slumber.

" Now, then, hold your cussed tongues, you waggabones! " thundered the voice of the keeper, as he entered the passage, carrying a lantern in his hand.

Some of the maniacs became stupefied with consternation all in a moment; and the voices of the rest fell to a lower key, yells and cries sinking into subdued moanings and half-stifled laments.

" This new order of the magistrates that I should visit the lunatics three times a day doesn't suit my book at all," growled the master of the workhouse, who, it appeared, was accompanying the keeper, and whose voice Melmoth had no difficulty in recognizing. " It seems that there's going to be a regular clear-out of these mad fellows, and that they're all to go to the county asylum in the course of a few days."

" But what's going to be done with this here chap? " inquired the keeper, as he and the master stopped at the grating of Melmoth's cell.

" Ah! that rests with the report which I and the surgeon may send in," responded the governor of the workhouse, in a lower tone than at first. " All confirmed cases of madness are to be packed off to the county asylum, thank God; but I don't know whether this is a confirmed case or not. What do you think? "

" I've already told you my opinion, sir," was the keeper's answer.

"You don't believe the fellow to be mad?" said the master, interrogatively, but in a still more subdued voice than before.

"No, I'll be hanged if I do," returned the keeper, not troubling himself to moderate his usual loud and dictatorial manner of speaking.

"Hush!" murmured the master. "The poor devil sleeps —"

"Not he," ejaculated the keeper, gruffly. "D'ye think, sir, I haven't seen enough of madness, both real and feigned, not to know which is which, arter having filled this sitivation for seventeen year, come next Janivary? Why, look at the wery position of the feller as he lies on his bed there. I'll be damned if it isn't all sham."

"If I thought so, after all I've heard about him from our surgeon and a certain Mr. Thurston who was here t'other day when he went off into a fit," said the governor, in a half-musing tone, but speaking in a voice that was clearly audible not only to the keeper but likewise to Melmoth himself, "I say that if I thought he really was playing any of his tricks, I'd devilish soon have him packed off to Newgate, I would — the monster!"

"Well, and you'll have to do it, sir, and to-morrow, too," exclaimed the keeper, brutally; "for I'll take my davy the fellow is no more mad than I am."

"We will see about it," rejoined the master. Then, after a few moments' pause, he added, "All things considered, I shall take your advice and send in a report to-morrow, to the effect that you recommend."

The governor and the keeper then withdrew, closing the door of the passage behind them; and total darkness once more reigned in the place occupied by the mad cells.

Yes, darkness, but not silence; for scarcely had the two officials retired, when the yells, screams, and other uncouth noises which were wont to make the night terrible there burst forth again, and with redoubled horror. Starting from his bed — springing from it, as if he were a maddened lion — Melmoth dashed himself in desperation against the strong bars, which vibrated to the fury of the shock. He felt that he was going crazy; he was already crazed for the time being. Goaded to the wildest recklessness by his own dreadful thoughts, by the infernal din which raged like the

revelry of hell around him, and by the terrible prospects opened up to his contemplation by the discourse which he had just overheard between the governor and the keeper, Melmoth had lost all control over his actions.

Although his lips gave not utterance to a word, yet it seemed to him as if some inward voice were roaring out, "I am mad! I am mad!" and, under the terrible influence of the demoniac spell which was upon him, he dashed himself upon the stone pavement, then against the bars, and then upon the bed, all the ironwork of which clanked as if chains were suddenly thrown down upon the floor. He was infuriate; his eyes gleamed in their bloodshot rage like those of a hyena; and the foam oozed from his mouth.

Tremendous was the influence which this appalling wrath exercised all in a moment upon the maniac neighbours of the monster-man. The infection of his fury was caught by those kindred spirits already goaded to such a rabid extreme; two or three, whose limbs had been hitherto held powerless and motionless by the strait-jacket and the trousers fastened to the mattress, burst from their bonds as giants would cast off the trammels of straws; and the whole lunatic company began dashing themselves, each against the bars of his own cell, while the most appalling cries and yells thrilled through the very walls of massive stone.

In a few minutes the keeper burst into the passage to ascertain the cause of a disturbance more terrible than even it usually was, and which had reached his ears as he was traversing the yard that lay between the tenement containing the mad cells and the main building. Seizing an enormous whip, he set his lantern upon a window-ledge, pushed the door close in order to prevent as much as possible of the infernal din from being heard outside, and then began to flagellate the maniacs one after another with the most merciless severity. Through the bars swept the long knotted lash of the miscreant's knout, — a knout of which the present Emperor of Russia (once Queen Victoria's welcomed guest) would have envied him the possession. Vainly did the yelling maniacs endeavour to elude the terrible thong; vainly also did they attempt to seize it and snatch the accursed instrument from his grasp. Practice had made him perfect in its use; frequent trials of its appalling powers had given him a marvellous experience in its efficient wielding. It literally

rent the clothes from the backs of the sufferers; and in great livid wales or bloody streaks did the flesh rise up wherever the lash fell. The punishment was diabolical, the accompanying yells and cries were appalling in the extreme.

But, ah! all on a sudden a new and fearful interest is given to the scene. For one of those maniacs who had a few minutes before burst from their coercive garments as if it were a mere vesture of tinder that they were casting off, one of those infuriate lunatics who seemed suddenly to have been inspired with the strength of Samson now all in a moment dashed open the iron gate of his cell. It was the lock which gave way; the bolt bent and yielded as if it were of lead, and the grated door screamed upon its hinges as it flew open.

An ejaculation of anguished terror burst from the lips of the keeper, as a sense of his mortal danger flashed like lightning to his mind. 'Twas the same as if a goaded tiger had suddenly broken lose. Not an instant was there for flight. The door is burst open, and, quick as the eye can wink, the liberated maniac, bounding forth, springs upon his enemy.

Down upon the pavement they roll together, another yell of agony thrills from the lips of the keeper, and at the next moment his voice is stifled, for the maniac's fingers fasten like an iron vise upon his throat. The suffocating wretch writhes awfully beneath the infuriate lunatic who lies above his convulsing form, with eyes gleaming down in hyena-like rage upon his distorted countenance. Inside the cells every one has become suddenly silent and motionless, as if a consternation had struck upon them all with the influence of a spell; countenances, on which the hideous workings seemed to have congealed all in a moment, leaving them horrible and ghastly to contemplate, were fastened as it were against the bars through which their eyes glared like living cinders.

But on the pavement, the work which they are beholding, and the view of which has thus paralyzed them all for a few instants, — that dreadful work is now done. Livid with strangulation, and his form still retaining the ominous posture in which it had crisped up as it were in its last convulsions, lay the keeper, — an inanimate corpse. His right hand still grasped the merciless weapon the use of which had led to the awful catastrophe that sealed his own fate; his eyes,

wide open, appeared ready to start from his head; and his tongue, black and swollen, lolled out between his foamy lips. All this hideous change had been wrought in a strong, hale, good-looking man in the course of a few short seconds; 'twas the just retribution which accursed tyranny should invariably receive.

The deed, then, was accomplished, and for nearly half a minute did the maniac murderer stand gazing down upon his victim, with mingled compassion and incredulity expressed in every lineament of his haggard countenance. He seemed to be pitying the wretch of whose death he could scarcely believe himself to be the cause. And during that brief interval of half a minute, a profound silence reigned in the mad cells.

But suddenly the maniac murderer yielded to the impulse of a new instinct. Starting from his motionless attitude of contemplation, he gave utterance to a wild cry of triumph; and, stooping down, he felt in the pockets of his victim for something which he fancied to be there. Then as he drew forth a bunch of keys which he jingled first as he swept them joyously over his head, and then clanged as he dashed them with a madder triumph against the bars, the prisoners inside the cells took up the cry which had burst from his lips; and the place was once more horribly alive with the din of maniac voices.

To open the gates of the several cells was now the work of a few moments; and, behold! Melmoth was free, in company with half a dozen raging, frenetic, infuriated lunatics. And had they not believed him to be one of themselves, they would doubtless have torn him to pieces; but he had been a prisoner with the rest, he was just released with the rest also, and, whatever notion the madmen might have entertained of their own condition and state of mind, they naturally enough regarded Melmoth as a brother victim to some cruel persecution whence they had now achieved their emancipation.

Seizing the lantern, the maniac who had killed the keeper rushed forth from the building, followed by all the others, Melmoth still keeping among them. For now that murder had been committed, he more than ever saw the necessity of playing the part of a madman, in case he should be caught and thrust back into his dungeon; and his only chance of

escape from the precincts of the workhouse was centred in his adhesion to the little band of lunatics who, he had no doubt, would clear themselves a passage despite of all opposition.

The moment that the madmen burst into the yard, their leader carrying the lantern in his hand, an alarm was raised by some paupers who belonged to the kitchen department; and the door leading into the main building was instantaneously closed and barricaded by the frightened inmates. The walls around the yard were high, and the only avenue of escape was by means of the door just fastened in the face of the band. This fact Melmoth's eagle eye perceived at a glance, and, urging his rabid companions on, he set them the example of making a desperate onslaught upon that door. With cries of rage and fury, the maniacs precipitated themselves against it. It shook, it quivered, the strong planks yielded and cracked in their framework; the assault was renewed, again and again did the desperate men dash headlong, as it were, like living waves, against the barrier that opposed their path. Some of the brickwork over the door gave way first, and fell in heavy masses upon the besiegers, maiming, wounding, and injuring them seriously; but, goaded all the more terribly to the execution of their purpose, and lashed up to a degree of ferocious frenzy, the maniacs, bleeding all over, and half-blinded with the dust of the dislodged masonry, threw themselves in one dense and compact body against the door. It burst open, or, rather, it was dashed completely out of its setting, driven in bodily, as if with the concussion of gunpowder or an explosion of foul air.

Then the maniacs rushed into the kitchen with which the door communicated; and in a moment every cupboard was torn open, every shelf examined, every nook and corner ransacked. The remains of cold meat were seized upon and devoured with even a cannibal voracity; the bread-store adjoining was pillaged of its contents, a barrel of small beer had its top knocked off and a considerable portion of the liquor disposed of in a few moments, and the buttery was invaded in an equally unsparing manner. The maniacs ate and drank like famished wolves; their bloodshot eyes glaring with a sort of ferocious joy and savage triumph at the whole proceeding. Gladly would Melmoth have urged

them to press on at once farther into the interior of the building, but he dared not interfere with their revel amongst the provisions until they had gorged themselves to repletion. And to this point did they arrive in an incredibly short space of time; for in about ten minutes their appetites were thoroughly satisfied, and the provender which they could not consume was scattered and trampled in all directions.

Meanwhile the master of the workhouse had mustered the most active and resolute of the able-bodied paupers; and arming them with pokers, shovels, tongs, broomsticks, and all such weapons as came ready to hand at the moment, he stationed his force in the hall to resist any further invasion of the building, while messengers had been sent off to the Tower to demand the assistance of a few soldiers. The new police were not in existence in those days, and little or no aid was to be expected from the parish constables or night-watchmen. The master was therefore compelled to rely upon such resources and means of defence as he had at his command upon the spot, until the soldiery should arrive.

But no sooner had the maniacs done their work in the kitchen, the bread-store, and the buttery, than Melmoth bade them seize upon the implements which those offices contained, and which constituted weapons of a more formidable character than the fire-irons and broom-handles of the enemy. Thus, when the liberated lunatics sprang up the staircase brandishing roasting-spits, choppers, mallets, and carving-knives, the paupers with the master at their head all took to flight in a moment; and, giving vent to cries of triumph and yells of frenetic joy, the madmen impulsively followed Melmoth who had now become their leader.

The hall was in their possession; the front door led into the street, and the path to liberty thus lay open and undisputed before them. But Melmoth was anxious to take his children with him; for, even in the wild whirl of his present thoughts and the terrible excitement under which he was labouring, he had leisure and the clearness of intellect sufficient to comprehend that from this time forth he must expect to be hunted by the bloodhounds of justice, and he might never find another opportunity of holding communication with those who were nearest and dearest to him. For an instant he hesitated what course to adopt; the next moment his resolve was taken, and rushing up the staircase leading

from the hall toward the infirmary, he bade the maniacs follow him. Those instincts and impulses which the voice of an angel could not have appeased nor tranquillized were still easy to direct into any particular channel, — as the torrent, which no mortal arm can stay, will nevertheless pour into the canals that are dug to receive its foaming volume and drain the land which it would otherwise inundate. Thus, as man's ingenuity may turn the course of a flood which he is utterly powerless to stop, so did the influence of Melmoth guide the movements of the maniacs whose progress and whose fury he could not possibly have checked even had he been so disposed.

Up the stairs they rushed, uttering frightful yells and giving vent to diabolical menaces, brandishing their terrible weapons with ferocious gestures, their eyes glaring wildly, their lips covered with blood-speckled foam. Doors were banged and barricaded all along the passages; and from the interior of the rooms the shrieks of frightened women burst forth. But the lunatic party, headed by its frenzied leader, paused not to attack those chambers; up the flights of stairs they all sped, and into the infirmary they burst as if it were a roaring, raging torrent, dashing open the door with an irresistible power.

The invalids gave vent to cries of terror, the drunken nurse fell down in a fit, and Melmoth's children were startled from the sleep in which they had been plunged. Instantaneously recognizing their father, their first impulse was to spring forth and fly into his arms; but when they saw that he held an enormous steel chopper in his hand and that he was backed by half a dozen ferocious-looking men all armed in a formidable style, they huddled together with mingled cries, and lamentations, and prayers. There was not a moment to lose; for Melmoth knew full well that some kind of succour must presently arrive to aid the governor of the workhouse in restoring order. He therefore commanded his children to rise, put on their clothing, and follow him. Yielding to the voice of paternal authority, they hastened to obey, but with cruel fear and visible trembling; and despite of the reassuring words which he now breathed rapidly in their ears, as he assisted them in resuming their apparel, they contemplated him with a terror and a grief that lacerated his very heart.

Two or three minutes were thus expended; and during that brief interval the maniacs ransacked a cupboard in which a few pots of jam and some bottles, each containing a small allowance of port wine, were kept for the use of the invalids. These things were disposed of in a trice; and then the lunatics, inflamed by the wine, began to dance and caper about the room in a style that would have been grotesque enough were not the presence of these unfortunate wretches so eminently alarming. They, however, attempted no injury toward the occupants of the infirmary; and when Melmoth's children were ready to take their departure, they obeyed in a moment the signal which their leader gave them to withdraw.

Down the stairs did the party rush once more, Melmoth holding his little girl by the hand, and his two sons following close behind him. No molestation was experienced, no opposition presented itself. Indeed, the path was as clear for the formidable band as if they were the only inmates of the workhouse; for the master and his able-bodied paupers did not dare show themselves again, and the soldiery had not as yet had time to arrive from the Tower. The hall was gained, the front door thrown open, and then, simultaneously flinging away their weapons, as if an instinctive feeling suddenly prompted them to act with caution in order to secure their freedom, the lunatics rushed into the street. Darting away in different directions, they disappeared in a few moments, and Melmoth, thus rid of their terrible companionship, plunged into the maze of dark and narrow streets in the vicinage of the old workhouse.

Taking up the little girl in his arms, he bade the two boys keep close behind him; and as they sped along, the kind and consoling words which the unfortunate man addressed to his motherless children reassured them completely, and made their poor hearts rejoice that they were thus restored to the care of their father.

CHAPTER XXXV

TREACHERY

It was about nine o'clock on the same evening that witnessed the exciting occurrences at Whitechapel Workhouse, and the scene now shifts to Paradise Villas.

In the front parlour of their residence Octavia and Pauline Clarendon were seated, in company with Mr. and Mrs. Page. The curtains were drawn, the lights were burning upon the table, and the ex-bagman was enjoying a glass of brandy and water, of which his spouse occasionally took a sip. This "worthy couple" had "just dropped in" half an hour previously, ostensibly to inquire after Octavia's health and have a little chat with Pauline, but in reality with a treacherous and sinister intention, as will shortly transpire.

Pauline was pale and care-worn; and although she endeavoured to appear as gay as possible in order to rally the spirits of her poor afflicted sister, and likewise for the purpose of treating Mr. and Mrs. Page with the courtesy which she was willing to display in return for many apparent civilities and neighbourly attentions on their part, there were nevertheless moments when she fell into a profound reverie, and the expression of her countenance denoted that the saddest thoughts were dominant in her mind.

Octavia was much altered, oh, so much, that had the Prince of Wales suddenly entered and gazed upon her now he would scarcely have believed that this was the same blooming, smiling, happy creature who but comparatively a few weeks back had surrended her virgin charms to his embraces. Three months and a half had only elapsed since the memorable evening when accident first threw the royal voluptuary in the way of the beautiful sisters, — three months and a half since he first saw and desired Octavia

Clarendon; and during that interval how much had taken place to change both her mental condition and her personal appearance.

The charming freshness of youth, with its peach-bloom upon its cheeks, its sunny brightness in the eyes, its willowy elasticity in the figure, and its graceful airiness in the footstep, — oh, all this was gone; and Octavia, though still eminently beautiful and perhaps more interesting than ever, was but the shadow of her former self. Her cheeks had lost their plump fulness and their carnation hues of health; slightly sunken, they were pale and colourless, alike with the canker of care and the blight of sickness. Her eyes — no longer rolling in a voluptuous languor, nor lighting up with the flame of fervid passion and joyous emotion — were fixed in look, and full of a deep, deep melancholy, varied at intervals by a certain vacancy which indicated that recently unsettled condition of the mind whence she had not altogether recovered. The rich contours of her form still retained their development, because she was naturally modelled upon a scale of the finest proportions; but they had lost that well-rounded plumpness which endowed them with so voluptuous a charm and which elevated the softness of feminine beauty into the splendour of a magnificent womanhood. She had grown thinner, to speak in common terms, and yet, any admirer of the sex who had never seen her before would not hesitate even now to pronounce her a most lovely creature, alike in face and form.

We have already observed that she was in the way to become a mother; but her condition in this respect was not as yet apparent. At the same time the truth — this truth — was, as a matter of course known unto herself, and to Pauline, — known also to Mr. and Mrs. Page, who had discovered the secret in the way already explained by the former in his conversation with the Prince of Wales. To his Royal Highness that secret had been communicated by Pauline in a brief but touching letter; for the maiden considered it to be her duty to make that announcement to the father of the babe which Octavia bore in her bosom. That letter was, however, dated from no particular address, obvious reasons inducing Pauline to conceal her place of abode from the knowledge of the man who, after seducing her sister, had sought to dishonour herself.

The visits of Mr. and Mrs. Page would have been cheerfully dispensed with by the Honourable Miss Pauline Clarendon; but, as we have ere now stated, they had exhibited so much neighbourly friendship toward the sisters, that it was impossible to receive them otherwise than with due courtesy. Although she had gained so much bitter experience in the reading of the world's lessons, and although the manifold dark phases of the human character had been forced upon her contemplation by such a series of infelicitous circumstances, yet her confidence in her species was not so utterly destroyed as to render her suspicious without a cause. She therefore saw no selfish, sinister, nor interested motive in the kindness which Page and his spouse appeared to demonstrate toward her sister and herself. She looked upon him as a well-meaning, bustling man, somewhat eccentric and prying withal, and upon his wife as a good-natured woman, excessively ignorant and supremely vulgar; but she would have been startled with surprise, indeed, had anybody whispered in her ears a single word calculated to throw a proper light upon the character and disposition of that mean, unprincipled, intriguing, hypocritical couple.

And thus, upon the occasion specified at the opening of this chapter, we find Mr. and Mrs. Page comfortably ensconced in the handsomely furnished parlour of the villa occupied by Octavia and Pauline Clarendon.

"Might I inquire, without being deemed impertinent," said Mr. Page, after a brief lapse in the discourse, "whether you have seen your noble father lately, Miss Pauline?"

"No, I have not seen him for some time," answered the young lady; then, in an abstracted mood, she added, "Not since the day of his marriage with Miss Aylmer."

"And does he not know where you are residing?" demanded the ex-bagman. "Does he not also know —"

And he glanced significantly toward Octavia, who at that moment was gazing vacantly upon the carpet.

"No, no," replied Pauline, with something like mingled impatience and bitterness in her tone. Then, in a low and hurried whisper, she observed, "Do not, I implore you, speak upon any topic which may touch a painful chord in the heart of my poor sister."

"Not for worlds," ejaculated Mr. Page, but in a similarly subdued voice. "I should be sorry indeed to disturb a mind

which within the last few days has made such marvellous progress toward the recovery of its equilibrium. But is it possible," he asked, in a whisper, "that Lord Holderness is unacquainted with his daughter's affliction — and its cause?"

"My father knows that Octavia became the victim of her unfortunate love for the Prince of Wales," responded Pauline, in a tone that was scarcely audible and with a look full of emotion; "and he knows likewise that her reason was affected. But he is ignorant — My God! that I can even sustain my feelings at the idea! He is ignorant, I say, that my poor sister is in a way calculated to afford living evidence of her dishonour."

And the tears rolled down Pauline's cheeks as she thus spoke.

"Come, come, my dear young lady, cheer up," said Mrs. Page, now taking upon herself the part of consoler.

"It is not so easy to cheer up, Julia," remarked her husband, "when one has many causes of affliction to contemplate and experience. Is your father happy and comfortable in this alliance which he has formed?" asked the ex-bagman, once more giving free vent to his curiosity.

"I cannot say, I know nothing of the matter, Mr. Page," answered Pauline, speaking in a tone which plainly declared that the subject was disagreeable to her.

"Well, miss, I will not utter another word upon the topic," said the ex-bagman. "By the bye, I believe that unhappy young gentleman, the Honourable Arthur Eaton, is a relation of yours — is he not?"

Pauline replied in the affirmative.

"But do you believe him guilty of the frightful deed imputed to him?" asked Mr. Page.

"Assuredly not!" exclaimed the generous-hearted maiden, her cheeks flushing with indignation at the bare suspicion which the query implied against a young man whose soul, she felt assured, was full of the loftiest and noblest feelings. "Depend upon it," she continued, with a marked emphasis, "that my Cousin Arthur is as innocent of that foul crime as I am myself, and his guiltlessness will become apparent when the judicial investigation takes place. At least, I should hope that the strange and mysterious circumstances which have combined to make him a victim will be fully and completely unravelled —"

"I hope so, too," exclaimed Mr. Page. "But not knowing anything of the young gentleman, I must confess that I took rather an unfavourable view of the business, after reading the newspaper reports."

"Was not the accusation first made against a young female whose innocence speedily became apparent?" asked Pauline; "and may not my cousin in the same manner have become, as I just now expressed myself, the victim of circumstantial evidence? The same Almighty Providence which decreed the justification of Miss Rose Foster will likewise make manifest the innocence of Mr. Arthur Eaton. At least, I sincerely hope so," added Pauline, emphatically.

"Let me see," observed Mr. Page; "he has been in prison now upwards of a month, and all the newspapers declared at the time that he was a monomaniac. I suppose he will be put upon his trial all the same?"

"He will assuredly court the fullest investigation," answered Pauline. "The rapid succession of unfortunate incidents which have occupied the interval since the mysterious event took place has altogether prevented me from visiting my cousin and affording him my sympathy. In fact, I have scarcely dared to leave my sister for a single moment," continued the young lady, again lowering her voice to such a tone as to be inaudible to Octavia; "otherwise I should have assuredly repaired to the dreadful prison in which Arthur Eaton is confined, and by my presence have assured him that there was at least one person in the world who did not believe him guilty of the crime imputed to him. But, although I was unable to visit him, I did not forget to write," added Pauline, "and I assured him of my sympathy."

"You acted most generously," said Mr. Page. "I suppose his father — Lord Marchmont, I believe — is dreadfully cut up?"

"The unhappy old nobleman has been confined to his bed ever since the fatal occurrence which threw so dark an aspersion upon the fame of his beloved son," replied Pauline; "but as the trial must soon take place, let us hope that the result will restore Mr. Eaton to liberty and honour, and his sire to health and happiness."

The conversation was at this moment interrupted by a knock at the front door, and Mr. Page interchanged a rapid

and somewhat uneasy look with his better half. This furtive glance was, however, unnoticed by Pauline, whose attention was instantaneously directed toward her sister; inasmuch as any sudden noise, especially a knock or ring at the door, invariably produced a startling effect upon her nerves.

Several heavy footsteps were now heard in the passage, and the maid-servant, opening the parlour door, said, "Some persons wish to speak to you, miss, if you please."

But before Pauline had time to utter a syllable in reply, the visitors pushed somewhat rudely past the domestic and entered the parlour. They consisted of three men, not over-prepossessing in their appearance, and whose aspect at once produced upon Pauline the effect of an evil presentiment, while the same frightened feeling was experienced by Octavia, who, starting to her feet, clung to her sister's arm as a daughter might throw herself upon the protection of a fond mother.

As for Mr. and Mrs. Page, they once more exchanged rapid glances; and in the look of the former there appeared to be a transitory expression of regret for some treacherous part which he was playing, whereas the woman's features were stamped with a cold and selfish decision.

"What do you require of me?" asked Pauline, now recovering her presence of mind and addressing the three men, who were gazing first at her and then at her sister.

"Which is Miss Octavia Clarendon?" demanded the foremost of the party.

"Oh, what do they mean to do with me?" exclaimed the unhappy young lady whose name had just been mentioned, and she clasped her hands in despair.

"Explain the nature of your visit, and be speedy," said Pauline, wrestling painfully against the strong spasm which ran through her entire frame; for once more did the presentiment of evil flame up with an appalling brilliancy in her mind.

"Well, we won't keep you any longer in suspense, miss," returned the spokesman of the party. "The truth is that Doctor Wigton and Doctor Smanks have consulted together, and they've come to the unanimous conclusion that it would be much more conducive to Miss Octavia's health and peace of mind, if she was taken proper care of for a short time, — a few months, or so; and they've signed a certificate to that

effect. This certificate has been placed in the hands of Doctor Burton; and we're the doctor's men. There's a chaise waiting outside — "

"O God! I understand you now too well — too well!" shrieked forth Pauline, all the anguish which had been accumulating while the man was speaking now finding scope for the development of its pent-up fury; and wildly she flung her arms around her sister's neck, exclaiming, "No — no — they shall not take thee from me, my own beloved Octavia! They shall not separate us thus!"

"What mean you, dearest?" cried the elder Miss Clarendon, returning the fond, the fervid, pressure of her sister's embrace. "Who will take me from you?" she asked, with a terrible calmness which was evidently the sure precursor of a still more frightful storm.

"Oh, Octavia, dearest, dearest Octavia," exclaimed Pauline, in a voice of the most rending, piercing, desolating agony, "they wish to take you from me — My God! they mean to separate us. Oh, we are motherless — we are all the same as if we were fatherless likewise — We are two orphan sisters, — yes, two orphan sisters, — alone and friendless in the world! And they will not allow us to remain together — they would tear us asunder — separate us — "

"No, no; they shall not — they shall not!" screamed forth Octavia; and, falling upon her knees at her sister's feet, she gazed up with a sudden expression of frenzied terror settling upon her countenance so marble pale. "Pauline, Pauline, you will not let me go! You will not let me be torn from you. They will place me upon the rack — they will subject me to the torture — they will put out my eyes — they will cut off my tongue — they will tear my flesh with red-hot pincers — "

"Oh, horror! she is going mad again — mad — mad!" shrieked Pauline, her own brain reeling with delirium as she thus gave unguarded and uncontrollable vent to her mortal fear.

"Mad! mad!" echoed Octavia, starting up to her feet like a body suddenly galvanized; and extending her arms toward the three men, who were slowly advancing farther into the room, she cried, "Avaunt, wretches! I know ye but too well. Ye are the myrmidons of the prince, ye are the same who slew the young princes in the Tower centuries

ago, ye are gifted with immortal life that ye may wreak immortal injury, ye are fiends in human shape. Avaunt! avaunt!"

And while the colour mounted to her cheeks, through the intensity of excitement, and her eyes glared with appalling wildness, and her bosom rose and fell with rapid convulsive heavings, — or rather, stifled sobs, — she stood in the midst of that apartment, her fine form drawn up to its full height, and her arms still extended with the air of a pythoness looking into a terrible futurity.

"Octavia — my beloved Octavia — calm yourself, I implore you," exclaimed Pauline, stricken with a frightful remorse at the unguarded expressions to which she had given utterance with respect to her sister's mental affliction.

"It is for you to calm yourself likewise, dear young lady," said Mr. Page, taking her by one hand, while Julia caught hold of her by the other. "Pray compose yourself, be tranquil," continued the ex-bagman, with an officiousness in his attempt at consolation which would have at once excited the suspicions of Pauline had she enjoyed the use of her discriminative powers at the moment.

"Yes, for Heaven's sake, tranquillize yourself," said Mrs Page; and as she and her husband both persisted in holding Pauline by the arms, under the semblance of administering solace and bestowing friendly attentions upon her, she was in fact retained a prisoner in their grasp.

This was no doubt the signal previously agreed upon between the treacherous couple and the mad doctor's emissaries; for while Pauline was struggling to escape from the hold which they maintained upon her, the three men seized on Octavia and began dragging her from the room.

"Let me go, I command you, let me go, I implore you," exclaimed Pauline, with desperate efforts to escape from Page and his wife, while Octavia's screams were suddenly hushed by one of the men placing his hand upon her mouth.

"You will do yourself an injury, dear young lady, pray be tranquil," cried Page, forcing Pauline down into an armchair.

The wretched girl beheld the ruffian gagging her unhappy sister as his two companions forced her out of the room, despite the tremendous efforts which she made to escape from their power. Then a sudden dizziness came over

Pauline, everything disappeared from her view, every sound died away in her ears, and she fainted.

When she awoke to consciousness once more, it seemed as if she were slowly recovering from the effects of a hideous nightmare; but as her ideas gradually arranged themselves in her mind, a gathering wildness, mingled with terror, appeared upon her countenance; and when she cast her looks with an expression of hurried and anxious inquiry around, and saw Page and his wife bending over her, but beheld not the dear object whom those searching glances sought, all the heartrending reality of the previous scene burst upon her comprehension. Then, with a wild shriek, she started up, but staggered immediately beneath the overwhelming weight of her dire affliction; and, falling upon her knees, she extended her clasped hands toward Page, exclaiming, "Tell me, sir, tell me what they have done with my sister."

"Dear young lady, pray tranquillize yourself," said the ex-bagman. "Look upon me and my wife — that is to say, Mrs. Page — as your sincere and devoted friends, who will see your sister's wrongs avenged — "

"But what have they done with her? Where is she gone?" demanded Pauline, springing up from her suppliant posture, and speaking with a petulance indicative of the most cruel suspense and nervous impatience.

"I am as ignorant as yourself, my dear Miss Clarendon, upon those points," replied the ex-bagman. "Am I not, Mrs. P.?"

"Oh, then Octavia is torn away from me, and I am alone — alone," cried the wretched, wretched Pauline, cutting short the answer which Julia was just commencing; and, falling back into the armchair, she covered her face with her hands and burst into an agony of weeping.

Mr. and Mrs. Page proffered their hypocritical consolations; but the blow which had stricken the young maiden so suddenly and so heavily was not to be mitigated in its effects by any words of human solace, however sincere and however replete with sympathy that language might be. Therefore, although she suspected not for a single moment the treacherous part which her false friends had been playing, she refused all the consolatory suggestions which they pretended to offer her. She would not listen to their proposal

that she should pass the night at their house, she was equally peremptory in declining the offer that Julia made to remain and take care of her; but hastening up to her own chamber, she locked the door, and, flinging herself more than half-distracted upon the bed, gave way to all the violence of a grief which human language has no power to describe.

CHAPTER XXXVI

AN EVENING AT CARLTON HOUSE

A MONTH had elapsed since the occurrences related in the preceding chapter; and it was now the middle of smiling, warm, and sunny May.

Once more must we conduct our readers to the private apartment of the Prince of Wales, — that apartment which he had not ceased to render serviceable to his intrigues and voluptuous enjoyments, although a wife now slept beneath the roof of Carlton House.

But into that chamber so luxuriously fitted up, and having the advantage of the private staircase, into that room embellished with equivocal pictures, we say, the footsteps of the Princess Caroline had not yet penetrated.

Their Royal Highnesses still ostensibly occupied the same bedchamber; that is to say, the prince was wont to pass the night with his wife when he was not too tipsy to seek her presence there, or when he was not more agreeably engaged in his own private apartment. But as these occurrences happened somewhat frequently, it may be taken upon an average that his Royal Highness honoured the princess with his company about four nights out of the seven in every week that had as yet elapsed since the matrimonial knot was tied. His insulting neglect and cruel indifference had begun full early and were increasing daily and hourly; but still the princess complained not to him. Nevertheless, she had a confidant to whom she unbosomed all her thoughts; and that viper whom she thus unconsciously fostered in her bosom was Lady Jersey.

But we have not yet reached that point when it will be necessary for us to enter upon details so painful and incidents so heartrending that we already tremble in anticipa-

tion of the tremendous task we have yet to fulfil. For the present we have to record another of the manifold voluptuous diversions in which it so frequently pleased his Royal Highness to indulge.

It was, then, as we have already stated, in the middle of the smiling month of May, and at about ten o'clock in the evening, that the Prince of Wales was engaged in the contemplation of a somewhat singular spectacle of which his private apartment was the scene.

The heavy hangings were drawn over the windows, the wax-candles were lighted, and the atmosphere of the chamber was perfumed with the choice flowers that filled the porcelain vases. His Royal Highness, who had not long quitted the dinner-table, was elegantly dressed in evening costume; his countenance was flushed not only with drinking, but likewise by the exciting scene on which his eyes were gloatingly fixed.

For on a tight-rope fastened across the room, at a distance of about three feet from the floor, a trio of beauteous creatures were dancing in a style which combined all the fascinating graces of the art with the most exquisite refinement of sensual provocation.

Through the gauzy dresses which the three charmers wore, the eye could almost trace and follow all the flowing outlines of those forms that were so admirable in their symmetry and so supple in all their movements. To the flexible grace of the swan's neck might be added the coiling power of the serpent, as the attributes of the lovely shapes that glided floatingly over the gently yielding rope. Never was elegance of motion more enchantingly blended with the soft sensuousness of amorous looks, than in the performance of those three accomplished votaries of the Terpsichorean art: never was the classic poesy of flowing attitude more effectively warmed into voluptuousness, than when these dancers adapted the varying expression of their ravishing countenances to the silent harmony of their movements.

It was a species of physical coquetry appealing to the sense in every undulation of the form, in every gesture of the arms, in every step of the feet, in every glance shot forth from the eyes, in every look assumed by the features, in every smile that shone sunnily upon the lips. Now, as if upborne by some invisible power, the exquisite forms

floated airily along the rope which the classically moulded feet appeared not to touch; now with slow, measured, and surpassingly graceful curves and inflections of the body, the superb contours of the bust would be altogether revealed; and now the gradual rounding of the arms and their elevation over the head would display to ineffable advantage their finished proportions and the ravishing beauty of the hands. Or the eyes, having suddenly flashed forth glances of burning desire, would by degrees mitigate the brilliancy of their lightnings and melt into the warm and continuous tenderness of an autumnal sunset, so that the looks which at first dazzled, penetrated, and bewildered, now inspired feelings of delicious rapture and sensuous softness. At the same time, perhaps, the lips would part in their moist redness, like a luscious fruit of the tropics, and slowly reveal teeth of pearly purity.

Then, again, the dancers would balance themselves with the points of their feet upon the rope, — those feet, so pliant and so yielding, stretched out, or rather downward, in such a manner that they seemed to form the unbroken and tapering continuation of the leg itself, without a joint; and in this attitude, the difficulty of maintaining which appeared to demand no additional effort, would they remain for upwards of a minute, throwing into their forms all the poetic grace of the Greek statues. Then, resuming their wavy, floating, flowing movements, they would sustain such a perfect uniformity of motion, attitude, and even look, that it appeared as if the two were but the shadows of the one. Thus, in a thousand little ways and with all the skill and artifice of that which we have above denominated a physical coquetry, did those three siren dancers detail, as it were, beauty after beauty, and display charm after charm, to the enraptured view of their royal spectator.

And beautiful indeed were the females who thus exhibited their accomplishments and developed their fascinations in the presence of his Royal Highness. They were young, and, although not virtuous, had lost nothing of the first freshness of youth. No artificial hue gave that bloom to their cheeks; no cosmetic was needed to enhance the brilliant transparency and dazzling whiteness of their skin. Their flesh was firm and plump to the eye; their shapes depended not upon the compressure of the corset to mark the flowing outlines or

sustain the well-developed contours. Mingled grace and voluptuousness, elegance and soft lubricity, rendered them charming as dancers and desirable as women; and the prince, doubtless knowing beforehand how agreeable would be the recreation which Germain had thus provided for him, was resolved to be alone in its enjoyment. None of his boon companions were therefore present at the enchanting spectacle: the royal profligate had it all to himself.

For nearly an hour did the exhibition last, broken by occasional intervals of repose on the part of the dancers, when they descended from the rope and partook of the champagne which the prince poured out for them with his own hand. Nor did he fail to bestow upon them the most fervid caresses, and manifest his appreciation of their exquisite beauty by means of tender dalliance and toyings. Then, when the performance was concluded and the three dancers were in reality unable to conceal their weariness any longer, the prince made them draw lots to decide who should remain as his companion for the rest of the night. The delicate point being duly settled, the two unlucky ones took their leave of the prince and departed by means of the private staircase; while the fortunate young lady on whom the lot fell remained alone with his Royal Highness.

The prince now rang the bell to give some orders to Germain ere he retired for the night; and in a few moments the discreet and faithful Frenchman made his appearance.

"You will request the Countess of Jersey to inform her Royal Highness," said the prince, "that I shall be compelled to sit up until a very late hour for the purpose of examining a mass of papers relative to the Duchy of Cornwall. Her Royal Highness will thence understand that I intend to remain in my own apartment to-night. You may now retire, Germain."

"May it please your Royal Highness," said the valet, "a person who has been waiting for the last two hours earnestly besought me to become the bearer of this note. I assured him that your Royal Highness was exceedingly occupied with important business — "

"And so I have been," exclaimed the prince, bestowing a smile upon the dancing-girl who was seated near him. "But where is this note? And who is the individual?"

Germain handed his royal master a sealed letter, observing

at the same time, "The gentleman declines giving his name, and is even careful to conceal his countenance as much as he can."

The prince took the note and opened it in an idle, leisurely manner; but the instant that his eyes caught a glimpse of the signature, a serious expression seized as it were upon his features; and, with a degree of interest as absorbing as it was suddenly excited, he read the following lines:

"Your Royal Highness will remember the solemn pledge which you gave me on a particular occasion, — a pledge to the effect that when the proper time should arrive your Royal Highness would assist me in the accomplishment of that aim which can alone render life tolerable. May I therefore implore your Royal Highness to fulfil the promise so generously made? And as my suspense is too acute to brook delay ere I receive from the lips of your Royal Highness a reiteration of that promise, I humbly but earnestly beseech the favour of a few moments' audience this evening.

"THE RESUSCITATED."

Having perused this note, the prince tore it up into small pieces, which he threw under the grate. He then reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute, deliberating within himself whether he should grant the interview solicited or not. But suddenly resolving upon the affirmative course, he rose from his seat, apologized to the dancing-girl for being compelled to quit her for a little while, and hastened to the Red Drawing-room, where he was accustomed to receive visitors upon private business. Germain then proceeded to the waiting-room to conduct the stranger to the presence of his royal master; and in a few minutes a tall man, enveloped in a cloak (despite the warmth of the weather), and holding a large silk handkerchief up to his face, was introduced into the Red Drawing-room.

Germain immediately retired, and the prince, walking straight up to the visitor, said in a low and agitated tone, "Have you not acted most imprudently, Mr. Ramsey, in coming hither?"

"I hope that your Royal Highness will not frown upon me for the great liberty which I have taken," observed the resuscitated criminal, withdrawing the handkerchief which

he had been holding up to his nose as if he were labouring under a violent cold; "but I have only just returned to London, after an absence of more than two months from England —"

"Ah! you have been out of the country, then?" exclaimed the prince. "Why, in the name of Heaven, did you not remain abroad altogether?"

"It was my original design to proceed to America and thence write to your Royal Highness to implore your generous though secret intervention with the government in my behalf," said Ramsey. "But circumstances occurred at sea which compelled me to return to England —"

"And what were those circumstances?" demanded the prince, impatiently. "Let me know everything, explain your exact position, state what you have to fear, and what to hope, and then I shall be enabled to judge how far I can assist you. But do not overrate my influence with the government, Mr. Ramsey; for, if you know anything of the present state of parties and political interests in this country, you must be aware that the Prince of Wales," added his Royal Highness, bitterly, "is a mere cypher in the estimation of the Ministry. Nevertheless," he hastened to observe, "there may be ways and means of serving you; for what I cannot accomplish myself, I often achieve through the influence of those noblemen who enjoy the confidence of the Cabinet and are yet secretly devoted to me."

"I will explain as briefly as I can the circumstances which compelled me to return to England," said Ramsey.

The prince flung himself upon a sofa, and pointed to a chair, which the resuscitated criminal took.

"Proceed, then," said the heir apparent. "I am prepared to listen attentively."

"It was in the early part of March," continued Ramsey, "that I embarked at Liverpool on board a schooner, named the *Firefly*, and bound for the United States. I was known on board as Mr. Gustavus Wakefield; and no one entertained the slightest suspicion that there was anything peculiar connected with my history. A month elapsed, during which our course was delayed by tempestuous weather; but we were nearing the place of destination when we came in collision with a pirate brig, called the *Royal George*. All the crew of the *Firefly* were slain in the

conflict, with the exception of a common sailor and myself, and we were taken prisoners by the pirates. This was the first occurrence so specially ominous to myself which had taken place since I quitted Liverpool; for, lo and behold! in the persons of the two chiefs of the freebooters, I recognized a couple of scoundrels with whom circumstances had made me acquainted in England."

"Then they were British pirates, eh?" exclaimed the prince, interrogatively. "And they had the consummate insolence to name their ship the *Royal George*? Did I not understand you that such was the case?"

"Your Royal Highness is correct," responded the resuscitated criminal. "The real truth is that the two men to whom I have alluded were compromised in some of the details of the affair which threw me into the grasp of justice, and sent me to the scaffold," added Ramsey, his voice suddenly sinking to a scarcely audible tone. "Joseph Warren, better known to the world of crime by the name of the Magsman, and Stephen Price, notorious under the appellation of the Big Beggarman — But your Royal Highness will pardon me," cried Ramsey, abruptly checking himself, as he saw a sudden and remarkable change come over the countenance and the manner of the prince; "I know that I ought not even to allude to such wretches in your presence, but the circumstances of my narrative constrained me thus to mention names well calculated to shock your ears — "

"Do not pause to offer apologies, Mr. Ramsey," exclaimed his Royal Highness, now recovering from the effects of the various disagreeable reminiscences which the abrupt mention of the name of Joe Warren, alias the Magsman, had excited in his mind. It is impossible to repress a feeling of disgust at the thought of such men — But pray continue your narrative. You were telling me that you recognized those two ruffians; and I suppose, therefore, that they recognized you also?"

"They did, your Royal Highness," returned Ramsey; "and I was compelled to implore and beseech them, almost on bended knees, but certainly with tearful eyes, not to betray my tremendous secret."

"Did they menace you on that head?" asked the prince.

"No; on the contrary, they promised fairly enough," observed the resuscitated; "but what reliance could I place in such miscreants?"

"Miscreants, indeed!" muttered the heir apparent to himself. "Pray continue your history, sir," he exclaimed aloud. "I presume that they compelled you to turn pirate?"

"There was no leisure for such a proceeding on their part, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Ramsey; "for within a few hours after the freebooters had captured and sunk the *Firefly*, one of his Majesty's ships came in sight. The *Royal George* vainly endeavoured to escape from the British frigate; and the result was that the pirates were captured by the *Diana* — "

"The *Diana!*" echoed the prince, instantaneously recollecting that this was the very same frigate in which Tim Meagles had been so unceremoniously packed off out of the country.

"That was the name of his Majesty's frigate on board of which I was transferred along with the rest," answered Ramsey. "It was in virtue of a compact proposed by the captain of the *Diana*, that the affair proved a bloodless one; and the only persons whom the captain regarded as pirates were Joseph Warren and Stephen Price. They were placed in irons, to be kept until the ship should return to England, in order to take their trial according to the usual routine, — the result of which will probably be — "

"Their death at Execution Dock, I hope," added the prince, abruptly. "The sooner such rascals are put out of the way, the better. But did you see on board the *Diana* any one bearing the name of Meagles?"

"Certainly, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Ramsey; "and it was in consequence of something which occurred relative to himself, that the *Diana* eventually put back to England."

"Explain the circumstances," said the prince, wishing to see whether Meagles had proved at all communicative to his fellow passengers on board the *Diana*.

"About ten days after the incident with the pirates," proceeded the resuscitated criminal, "we were overtaken by a fast sailing cruiser, just as we were within sight of American land; and this vessel brought out despatches for the captain of the *Diana*, ordering him to return to England forthwith. It was well known on board that Mr. Meagles had been sent away in the first instance on account of some treasonable affairs in which he was supposed to have been implicated at

home, at least such was the report, and the original instructions of the captain were to land him in America. But the counter-orders seemed to imply that he had either been pardoned, or that he was innocent of the matter charged against him; for the captain, after reading the despatches, told him that he need no longer consider himself a prisoner, and that he was to be taken back to his native land."

"Accursed Letitia Lade!" muttered the prince to himself. "It was you, wretch as you are, that forced me into the necessity of pleading at the Home Office for the pardon of Meagles," he added, in the same musing tone to himself, but still apostrophizing the absent Amazon.

"Did your Royal Highness make an observation?" asked Ramsey, fancying that he heard the prince saying something.

"Yes — no — nothing of importance," replied the heir apparent. "Were you and Meagles friendly during the voyage home?"

"I saw but little of him, your Royal Highness," answered the resuscitated. "The truth is that I affected to be seriously indisposed, and was kindly accommodated with a cabin to myself, in which I remained almost constantly; for I need hardly remind your Royal Highness that I was in an incessant dread of either being recognized, or else of hearing something which might throw me into a confusion calculated to engender the strangest suspicions. Moreover, Meagles had so ingratiated himself with the officers of the ship, that even before his pardon arrived, it seemed that he had been treated by them with the utmost consideration and attention, dining at their mess, constantly in their company, smoking, drinking, singing, and card playing — "

"And after his pardon did overtake him, I suppose he was more sought after and caressed than ever?" said the prince, interrogatively. "But, to return entirely to your own affairs," he added, without waiting for an answer, "did you escape recognition after all? Or did those villains, Warren and his accomplice, betray you?"

"I escaped recognition, and they did not betray me," replied Philip Ramsey. "But when we all landed yesterday at Portsmouth, Joseph Warren took the opportunity to place his finger upon his lip and make me a sign which was significant enough."

"What did he mean?" demanded the prince.

"I will explain myself to your Royal Highness," returned Ramsey. "The principal witnesses against this Warren and Stephen Price relative to the destruction of the *Firefly* and the murder of the crew are myself and the sailor, who, though seriously wounded in the fray, has since completely recovered. It is true that a couple of Warren's men, named Watkins and Bradley, have agreed to turn king's evidence: but their testimony would be to some extent suspicious, from the very position they were in as officers of the pirate ship. Therefore the evidence of myself and the man Paul Winnington, the surviving sailor of the *Firefly*, will be needed upon the trial. The captain of the *Diana*, believing me to be a respectable merchant, allowed me at once to come to London, on my solemn pledge to appear as a witness when the Admiralty Court shall require my presence; and Warren, doubtless having heard it whispered that such was the fact, gave me as we landed the significant look of which I have spoken and which expressed the word 'Beware' as eloquently as a glance and gesture can possibly perform the part of the language of the tongue."

"And now what do you propose to do, Mr. Ramsey? And what do you wish me to undertake in your behalf?" asked the heir apparent.

"My pardon, great prince, my pardon!" exclaimed the unhappy man, clasping his hands together, while the big tear-drops rolled down his handsome though somewhat care-worn countenance.

"But if you obtained it, would you show yourself boldly abroad again in the world?" demanded the prince.

"No, never, never!" hastily replied the resuscitated. "But I should at least enjoy the assurance of personal safety, and not tremble at every searching look that might accidentally be fixed upon me."

"Are you afraid that even if you were recognized by any one who had known you formerly, such an individual would be stern, and harsh, and cruel enough to give you up to justice after all you have undergone?"

"Yes, oh, yes, I am convinced of it!" exclaimed Ramsey, with considerable excitement both in his tone and manner. "First, there is Sir Richard Stamford himself, who would show me no mercy; then there is a certain nobleman of lofty

rank and great wealth, who discovered that I was the object of his wife's tenderest and best affections, and who indeed was the main cause of my abrupt departure from England, — a course to which he urged me by means of the most terrible threats of vengeance."

"What! did this amour take place after your trial and —"

"And execution, your Royal Highness would add," said Ramsey, in a low deep tone which was also penetrated with a slight accent of bitterness. "But no matter, I must make up my mind to adopt that one tremendous incident in my life as the date which closes one portion of my career and marks the opening of another. It is as it were the date of death and life."

"And a noble lady loved you since that fatal era in your existence?" mused the prince, without heeding the observations which the criminal had just made. "But she was doubtless ignorant at the time — "

"Oh, yes, she was ignorant then of my accursed fate!" exclaimed Ramsey. "And I was so happy in the enjoyment of her love, and she had consented to fly with me, yes, to leave her husband for my sake — "

"Your amour was deeply tinged with romance, Mr. Ramsey," observed the prince.

"Ah! it was indeed characterized by extraordinary circumstances," pursued the criminal; "and not the least of all was the fact that this high-born lady, so eminently beautiful and of such impassioned temperament, came a virgin to my arms."

"A virgin!" echoed the prince. "I thought you told me she was married to a nobleman who persecuted you on her account."

"And such is indeed the truth," responded Ramsey. "But although she had been married upwards of six years, she was still as innocent, pure, and chaste in body as she was fervid, impassioned, and glowing in mind."

"You astonish me," exclaimed the prince. "Do I know this heroine of so strange a history?"

"Your Royal Highness knows her well," answered Ramsey. "But I dare not say more upon the subject — "

"Oh, how cruelly you have piqued my curiosity," exclaimed the prince. "I would give worlds to know who this lady is. Will you tell me her name? Ten thousand,

thousand times do I swear not to betray your confidence, and I shall positively esteem it a favour if you will comply with my request. I never in all my life experienced so vivid an interest in another person's amour as in yours."

"If your Royal Highness commands me to reveal this secret," began Ramsey, "I have no alternative — "

"Then I do command you!" cried the prince, every lineament of his countenance expressing the most lively curiosity. "Speak, tell me who was this marvellous beauty — this heroine of so romantic a history?"

"But what opinion will your Royal Highness form of me, if I betray that noble lady?" said Ramsey, still hesitating.

"It is in the strictest confidence, and no harm can ensue," rejoined the prince. "Come, tell me quickly, who was she?"

"The Countess of Desborough," answered Ramsey.

"What! the Countess of Desborough?" exclaimed his Royal Highness, starting up from the sofa as if with the sudden influence of an electric shock. "Is it possible? The proud, imperious, cruel, and prudish Eleanor of Desborough?"

"I have told your Royal Highness the truth," responded Ramsey, somewhat amazed at the unexpected degree of excitement which the revelation of the noble lady's name had produced upon the prince.

"You astound me! I am struck as with a consternation," continued the heir apparent, his looks verifying the words which he was uttering. "But, ah! now a light breaks in upon me, you have explained the mystery which enveloped the domestic life of the Earl and Countess of Desborough, the circumstance of their occupying separate chambers — Yes, I understand it all now, the miserable husband is impotent."

"That is the tremendous secret of the Desboroughs," observed Ramsey. "But I implore your Royal Highness to place an eternal seal upon your lips — "

"Such an injunction is unnecessary, Mr. Ramsey," interrupted the prince, still scarcely able to throw off the consternation of amazement which had seized upon him. "And so the brilliant Eleanor was your mistress — your paramour?" he continued, in a musing tone. "Well, methinks that you have trained her to a path which she has not since shown any inexperience or hesitation in pursuing;

for the last time I heard of her was about a month or five weeks ago, when she was in company with a certain Lord Florimel, — a baby-faced, beardless, pretty young fellow, who was dressed for the nonce in feminine apparel."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Ramsey, with an accent of bitterness in his voice; then, almost immediately, he added, with his usual tone and manner, "But of course I can be nothing to her now, unless it be an object of horror and loathing."

The prince began to pace the room in a thoughtful mood. It was evident that some new idea, engendered by the discourse which had just taken place, was uppermost in his mind, and he was deliberating how to give expression to it. Ramsey followed him with his eyes; and in the breast of the resuscitated criminal arose a vague suspicion that the heir apparent longed to break to him some project which he nevertheless knew not precisely how to broach.

At length the prince stopped short suddenly within a couple of paces of the spot where Ramsey was seated, and, looking the resuscitated criminal full and even significantly in the face, he said, "Do you care for the Countess of Desborough now?"

A portion of the truth flashed in an instant to the comprehension of Ramsey; he saw that the heir apparent had some design relative to the beautiful countess, and that he wished to make him the agent and tool to carry it out.

"I care nothing for her ladyship now," was accordingly the reply given by the astute criminal.

"And I suppose that after what I have told you relative to her new amour, with Lord Florimel, I mean," said the prince, "you would not be particular how you even took a part against her?"

"I should certainly be well pleased to avenge myself on her for her perfidy toward me," returned Ramsey, the prince's question itself furnishing the cue to the answer which was sure to be most welcome.

"Now listen to me, Mr. Ramsey," continued the heir apparent, "and I will reveal a certain secret to your ears, as you have confided a secret to mine. In a word, I love this haughty, beauteous, and impassioned Countess of Desborough; but she hates me. More than once has she been on the very verge of falling into my arms, and accident has saved her. The measures which I have adopted to

ensnare her have rendered me the object of her aversion. That such is her feeling toward me, I am well assured. To be avenged upon her, then, to gratify my own passion at the same time, to humble her, and appease the desires which boil up like a lava stream within me whenever I suffer my imagination to gloat upon her image, — these are now the aims which I have in view, and which yourself can assist me in carrying into execution."

"I am at the command of your Royal Highness," said Ramsey, scarcely able to conceal the delight which he experienced at thus finding himself taken as it were alike into the confidence and the service of the prince. "Your Royal Highness can restore me to comparative happiness, and at all events to certain security; and in return, I will become your slave, for any purpose, no matter whether of good or of evil."

"You pledge yourself, then, to aid me in the design which I have broached?" said the prince, his imagination now filled with a thousand voluptuous ideas relative to the beauteous Eleanor of Desborough.

"I pledge myself, body and soul, to the service of your Royal Highness," responded Ramsey.

"Then let this be the compact between us," rejoined the prince: "that when you, by means of any course of proceeding which you may think fit to adopt, ensure me the enjoyment of both love and vengeance with regard to the Countess of Desborough, in that same hour, I say, shall the document containing your full pardon be placed in your hands. I will procure it to-morrow, and therefore the sooner you perform your part of the agreement, the more cheerfully shall I acquit myself of mine."

"Be it so, great prince," exclaimed Ramsey; "the grass shall not grow under my feet."

The resuscitated criminal then took leave of the heir apparent, and issued forth from Carlton House, enveloped in the ample cloak, with his hat slouching over his countenance, and holding the silk pocket-handkerchief up to his mouth.

"Oh, haughty, cruel, and imperious Countess of Desborough," exclaimed the prince, aloud, the moment the door of the apartment had closed behind Philip Ramsey, "the hour of vengeance approaches! Thou shalt yield thyself up to my embraces, I will revel in thy charms, and then,

when I have drunk to satiety of the cup of bliss which thou shalt fill for me, I will spurn thee from me as the paramour of a wretch who had passed through the hands of the common hangman. This will be a glorious vengeance, Eleanor, a glorious vengeance," cried the prince, rubbing his hands gleefully. "But, ah! the return of that fellow Meagles, and the scrape which this scoundrel Warren has got himself into again, — these are occurrences which damp the pleasure that I should otherwise enjoy in such undiluted deliciousness when I think of my passion and my hatred, my love and my spite, my desire and my vengeance, in respect to thee, thou beauteous Eleanor. But let me not suffer gloomy presentiments and evil apprehensions to mar the joy which is in store for me. Meagles is powerless: he can do nothing against me. While those documents were within his reach, he could sting me with the venom of a viper; now all the efforts of his malignity will not be more galling than the bite of a gnat. And as for this Warren, well, what does he know? What can he do? What can he say? That his wife has been my paramour — Ah! the English public are so accustomed to hear such tales concerning their future king, that they cease to experience surprise, and they know full well that I do not care a damn for their displeasure."

Having arrived at this very satisfactory conclusion, the heir apparent to the British throne suddenly remembered that the dancing-girl was waiting for him in his own private apartment; and he accordingly proceeded thither, to gratify in the arms of the Terpsichorean votary those desires which had been so excited by the idea and the hope of speedily possessing the Countess of Desborough.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE CONVERSATION

It was on the day following the incidents just related, and at about two o'clock in the afternoon, that we shall find the Duchess of Devonshire alighting from her carriage at the mansion of the Earl and Countess of Desborough in Berkeley Square.

Eleanor was at home; indeed, she was seated alone in the drawing-room at the moment when her friend Georgiana was announced.

"It is quite an age since I have seen you, my dearest Eleanor," said the duchess, warmly pressing the hand of the charming countess. "Four or five weeks, and you have been all the time at Stamford Manor — "

"It is indeed five weeks since we last met," observed Eleanor; "and by the bye, my dear Georgiana, I must give you a scolding for the serious manner in which you might have suffered me to be compromised — "

"Oh, I recollect now," exclaimed her Grace, bursting out into as merry a laugh as the restrictions of etiquette would possibly allow. "That affair in Chancery Lane, with Miss Plantagenet — "

"Your scapegrace cousin Lord Florimel," interrupted the Countess of Desborough, with a rather serious look. "Do you know, Georgiana, that it was too bad of you?"

"My dear friend, there was no opportunity for me to give you a hint, especially before that horrible character Lady Lade — "

"And yet you yourself introduced Lord Florimel to me as Miss Plantagenet," said Eleanor, still preserving a tone of remonstrance; "and I am of course certain that you were well aware who it really was all the time."

"Yes, but at that moment I did not know that Lady Lade was in the secret," returned the duchess. "However, I admit that it was imprudent and foolish on my part; but really I did it more as a joke than with any other motive, and you are well aware, dear Eleanor, that I could not have had a sinister or malignant reason with regard to yourself. I love you too well, as my best and dearest friend, to injure a hair of your head," added the generous-hearted though gay, giddy, and profligate duchess.

"I believe you, Georgiana," said Eleanor, taking her friend's hand and pressing it warmly. "Anything more, then, that I may remark upon the subject will not be in anger; indeed, that is a sentiment which I have not entertained all along. It was merely a little annoyance — nothing more. But figure to yourself the embarrassments into which the incident plunged me, when I assure you that, fully believing the beautiful and well-behaved Miss Plantagenet to be precisely what she chose to represent herself, I innocently and ingenuously made her my companion in a visit to the serious-minded, secluded, and retirement-loving Marchioness of Bellenden. The marchioness, you know, is a particular friend of mine; and I respect as much as I love and esteem her. Not for worlds, then, would I have been the instrument of carrying vexation, scandal, and annoyance into her house. But, behold! some evil spirit must have prompted me to take the false Miss Plantagenet with me to Bellenden Priory on that occasion; and the same unlucky train of circumstances led to the exposure of the cheat — "

"I suppose that the Marchioness of Bellenden was horrified," exclaimed Georgiana, laughing heartily. "But she could not have imagined that you had knowingly and wilfully taken a disguised lover to her house?"

"Fortunately an explanation had already been given showing how Miss Plantagenet — or rather Lord Florimel — became my companion," continued Lady Desborough; "but that explanation had likewise revealed to the marchioness the fact that the young nobleman had shared Mrs. Fitzherbert's bed at the house in Chancery Lane. Thus, although I was completely exonerated, the reputation of Mrs. Fitzherbert was as totally sacrificed in the esteem of Lady Bellenden."

"But her ladyship with her retired habits and truly

Christian charity will not make the delicate incident a topic of conversation elsewhere?" observed the duchess, interrogatively.

"Assuredly not," answered the countess. "Besides, she was too much alarmed at the exposure which took place in her own drawing-room not to be anxious to hush it up as fully as possible. There is a young lady of the name of Foster staying with her, and this charming girl — for lovely and amiable she assuredly is — was once thrown in Lord Florimel's way in some manner that left no very agreeable impression upon her mind. Accordingly, upon entering the room where your scapegrace cousin and myself were seated with the marchioness, that young lady instantaneously recognized him and proclaimed who he was. His lordship fled from the apartment in a state of confusion and dismay which you can perhaps more readily conceive than I can describe; but in precipitating himself down the stairs — for a headlong flight it assuredly must have been — his foot slipped and he fell with a violent concussion against a porcelain vase or some such ornament. He was taken up senseless, and I am bound to declare that the marchioness, suddenly forgetting all her resentment, was profoundly afflicted at an accident which we all at first believed to have proved fatal. Without alarming the household, we raised him in our arms, bore him between us into the room whence he had just before fled so precipitately, and bestowed upon him all the attentions which our fears in his behalf could possibly suggest. He rallied in a short time; but it was evident that his reason was temporarily — if not altogether — impaired. Nevertheless, our grief at the accident was mitigated on finding that it had not proved fatal upon the spot."

"And then, I suppose, came the question of what you were to do with him?" said the Duchess of Devonshire, inquiringly.

"Precisely so," responded Eleanor. "The marchioness began to perceive all the inconvenience and the probable scandal that might arise from giving the injured nobleman an asylum beneath her roof; and it was therefore suggested by myself that his lordship should be removed as speedily and also as privately as possible to his own residence in Piccadilly. But then arose the embarrassing question, how

was he to be conveyed thither? If I took him in my carriage, his servants would naturally conceive the most injurious suspicions relative to myself; and if the marchioness sent him in her own carriage, her own domestics accompanying the vehicle could not fail to learn who the disguised invalid was. In either case the most unpleasant impressions would be made concerning the marchioness or myself."

"It was indeed a bewildering affair, a perfect dilemma," observed the Duchess of Devonshire. "And how did you extricate yourselves from the difficulty at last?"

"The marchioness resolved to take two of her servants into her confidence and explain to them that the young nobleman, after assuming female apparel in pursuance of some silly freak, had imposed alike upon herself and me. In fine," added the Countess of Desborough, "Lady Bellenden bade me return home and leave her to manage the affair in the best way she could. I called upon her next day and found that she had contrived to extricate herself from the perplexity in a way sufficiently satisfactory to herself; for, in order that Lord Florimel's domestics should not ascertain at whose house their master had met with the accident while disguised in female apparel, the marchioness had him removed to the abode of her own medical man, to whom she sent a note explaining the circumstances of the case."

"Admirably contrived," exclaimed the duchess, "I presume that you are aware that the young scapegrace has quitted London for a few weeks and repaired to the seaside?"

"No, I had not learned this circumstance," observed Eleanor. "I suppose that, on recovering from the effects of the accident, he was recommended to seek a change of air?"

"Something of that kind does he tell me in a note which I received from him a few days ago, and which is dated from Dover," said the duchess. "He states that a slight injury which he had sustained from a fall compelled him to repair to the seaside to recruit his strength. Have you seen your friend the Marchioness of Bellenden lately?" inquired the duchess, merely for the sake of continuing the discourse, in which there was a sudden pause after the previous observation.

"No, the marchioness has left London for a short time," returned Eleanor. "I believe that her lawsuit which is now

verging upon its close has compelled her to visit some provincial places where she expects to glean valuable information in aid of her cause. But I remember," added the countess, laughing, "that I was to give you a scolding, Georgiana, for wilfully and wickedly placing me in such an awkward predicament with your scapegrace cousin."

"My dearest friend," exclaimed the duchess, likewise smiling, but rather with a sly significancy than a positive gaiety, "if you never find yourself in a more perplexing or perilous dilemma than that one, you will indeed have reason to congratulate your good fortunes. The romantic adventure in which you were involved with my cousin Gabriel is nothing when compared with an incident that happened to me some time ago at the very country-seat which you have lately purchased."

"What! at Stamford Manor do you mean?" cried the Lady Desborough. "I never heard of your being there."

"And yet I passed a night within its walls about eight or ten weeks ago," continued the duchess; "and I had a companion with me, one of the handsomest gallants of the age —"

"Ah! a light breaks in upon me," interrupted Eleanor. "But is it possible that you were the lady who visited the manor one evening with the prince?"

"Such is the fact, my dear friend," responded the duchess, smiling. "I do not fear to make you my confidante. Indeed, I have already confessed to you, upon a previous occasion, that there has existed a certain intimacy between myself and his Royal Highness, whom, by the bye, I have ceased to look upon with any favourable sentiment since his cruel and heartless conduct to our poor friend Fitzherbert. But how came you to learn that the prince and a lady passed the night at Stamford Manor?"

"From the old couple who were in charge of the house when the earl and myself first went to inspect it," answered the countess. "They were full of the visit which his Royal Highness paid the manor; and I can assure you, my dear Georgiana, that they were not sparing in the compliments which they lavished upon your beauty."

"I am much obliged to them," said the magnificent duchess, smiling complacently as she turned her head for a moment to catch a glimpse of her splendid countenance in the nearest mirror. "But I hope that they did not suspect

who I was?" she observed, with a sudden manifestation of anxiety.

"They entertained not the faintest idea of the truth in that respect," answered the countess. "But how came you to incur the risk of so seriously compromising yourself?"

"I will narrate to you the whole adventure, my dear Eleanor," returned the duchess; "and you will then see that there was one little episode in it far more perplexing, extraordinary, and romantic than your affair with the disguised Lord Florimel. But, by the bye," exclaimed Georgiana, as the sudden thought struck her, "did that worthy old couple at Stamford Manor ever tell you anything relative to a ghost which was alleged to have been seen at the house on the very evening of the visit of his Royal Highness and myself?"

"A ghost!" ejaculated the countess, laughing. "No, I never was favoured with any tale of that nature. But I recollect, now you mention the circumstance, that old Mrs. Bryan one day commenced an anecdote of the kind in the presence of the earl and myself; and his lordship cut her short by a request that no silly narratives of apparitions might ever be circulated in his household. I was therefore deprived of the exciting pleasure of hearing Mrs. Bryan's ghost-story," added the beauteous Eleanor, still smiling gaily.

"Then you shall enjoy that pleasure now, my dear friend," rejoined the Duchess of Devonshire, continuing the discourse in the same semijocular and chatty strain. "But first I must tell you how the prince and myself happened to be benighted and to take refuge at Stamford Manor. Some weeks ago I let you into the secret of all that had occurred relative to poor Octavia Clarendon. Well, you know that when she suddenly lost the use of her reason on visiting the prince at Carlton House, his Royal Highness sent for me and I conveyed her to my villa in Buckinghamshire. The prince, being greatly alarmed on her account, and feeling uneasy lest proper precautions should not be adopted to prevent her from escaping and making her wrongs public, followed me next morning to the villa. There he passed the rest of that day, but without seeing Octavia, whom I had already placed under the care of the discreet and trustworthy Doctor Clarges. Having assured himself that every necessary

measure had been adopted to meet the distressing emergency, the prince resolved to return to town in the evening, and he insisted that I should become his travelling companion. As we were passing along the road in the vicinage of Stamford Manor, the carriage broke down; and, having learned from a peasant who was journeying that way at the moment, that we might no doubt obtain an asylum at the manor, which was merely occupied by an old couple charged with the care of it, the prince persuaded me to act upon the suggestion. The prince's servants were accordingly left to patch up the carriage as well as they could and take it back to Aylesbury, with instructions to get it repaired during the night and call for us early in the morning at the manor. A short walk brought us to the front door of that mansion, and an asylum did we accordingly obtain. Now it happened that a certain Mr. and Mrs. Page were there at the time, on business connected with Sir Richard Stamford; and of this Mr. Page the prince had some knowledge. In the course of conversation Mr. Page related to us that very ghost-story with which Mrs. Bryan was no doubt anxious to regale your ears when the earl, as you just now informed me, cut short her old-womanish garrulity. The substance of the story was that while Mr. and Mrs. Page were occupied in the library of the mansion, they were suddenly visited by the apparition of that notorious criminal, Philip Ramsey, the Aylesbury banker, who was hanged — "

The Countess of Desborough gave a convulsive start, while a ghastly, a hideous pallor seized upon her countenance; but her lips, that had suddenly become of an ashy hue, were compressed with a clenching tightness, as if to keep back the scream that rose to the very tip of her tongue.

" Heavens! what is the matter? " exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire, literally bounding from her seat and catching her friend by the hand. " What ails you, my dearest Eleanor? What ails you? "

" Nothing — a transitory indispositon — but it is gone," faltered the countess, with a superhuman struggle to stifle the menaced outburst of agonized feelings which naturally accompanied the torturing reminiscences so abruptly awakened in her soul. " Pray proceed, Georgiana, pray proceed," she murmured, with quivering lip, while her whole frame still trembled like an aspen-leaf.

" Eleanor, in the name of all our friendship, what means this emotion? " demanded the duchess. " You are not a child to be terrified by a ghost-story, which in the sequel will prove to have been nothing supernatural after all; and you have not been seized with the sudden indisposition which you alleged as the means of tranquillizing my fears concerning you. Tell me, then, tell me — "

" Oh, my beloved friend," exclaimed the countess, now bursting into that flood of anguished weeping which would no longer be restrained, " I am very, very unhappy! " and she threw herself upon the bosom of the duchess.

" Compose your feelings, Eleanor, give not way to this dreadful grief," said the generous-hearted Georgiana, in a tone of the most tender solace. " There! let me wipe those streaming eyes, as if I were your sister, for you know that I love you as well as if you were my sister. Giddy, dissipated, frail as I may be, Eleanor," added the duchess, in a voice full of a touching pathos, " I entertain nothing but the kindest feelings toward you."

" I know it, Georgiana, I know it," murmured the unhappy countess, embracing her friend with the warmth of deepest gratitude. Then, disengaging herself gently from Georgiana's arms, she wiped the tears from her countenance, saying, in a firmer tone, " Yes, I am unhappy — very unhappy; but the time has now come — accident has pointed it out, circumstances have indicated it — when I must make a confidante of you."

" What! have you other secrets that weigh upon your mind, my poor Eleanor, in addition to the one tremendous sorrow that you revealed to me a few months ago? " and the looks of the duchess, as she thus spoke, were full of mingled sympathy and curiosity.

" Oh, yes, I have other secrets of a fearful nature, — secrets which at times convulse my heart with a mortal anguish," exclaimed the Countess of Desborough, in a tone of concentrated bitterness. " But proceed with your narrative first, my dear Georgiana; tell me all that you have to narrate, and then I will pour forth my sorrows into your sympathizing bosom."

" But wherefore ask me to return to a history which has become dull and even absurd in comparison with the tale of those afflictions which I am so anxious to hear from your lips? " demanded Georgiana.

"I have my reasons for the request which I have just made," responded Eleanor. "Continue your narrative, then, my dear friend, omit not a single detail, abridge not one particular; and you will presently comprehend the motives which influence me in beseeching this favour at your hands."

"Be it as you say, Eleanor," remarked the duchess, utterly at a loss to imagine how the history of her adventures at Stamford Manor could have any possible connection with the woes of her friend.

By this time the countess had regained a certain tranquillity of demeanour, although the colour still remained absent from her cheeks of delicate olive complexion, and her bosom was every now and then convulsed with a stifled sob.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE BEDROOM SCENE AT STAMFORD MANOR

"I WAS telling you, my dear Eleanor," continued the Duchess of Devonshire, "that a certain Mr. and Mrs. Page whom we found at the manor were full of the belief that they had seen the apparition of Philip Ramsey, the Aylesbury banker, who suffered the extreme penalty of the law some months ago at Newgate. Of course neither his Royal Highness nor myself put any faith in the tale, ascribing the circumstance to the fevered or perhaps affrighted imaginations of two persons in whose minds the awful tragedy connected with the manor was doubtless uppermost. Mr. Page, who possessed an inordinate love of hearing himself talk, entered elaborately upon the alleged occurrence, and even described with peculiar minuteness every feature of Ramsey's countenance. He, indeed, was one of the witnesses against that person, or at all events in some manner instrumental in bringing him to justice, and he therefore knew his personal appearance well. It seemed that Ramsey was a very handsome young man, as the newspapers reported at the time. He was eight and twenty, tall and well made, with a Grecian countenance, fine dark eyes, splendid teeth, and an olive complexion, a little more dusky than your own, dear Eleanor."

"Go on, Georgiana, go on," said the countess, with the petulance of a nervousness torturingly poignant.

"This Mr. Page of whom I have been speaking," continued the duchess, "not only described Ramsey's appearance with the minuteness arising from a personal knowledge of the man, but he likewise produced a portrait of the original."

"A portrait?" ejaculated Eleanor, to whose mind flashed

the incident of that picture which was painted by George Woodfall and the exhibition of which had revealed simultaneously to her husband and herself the real name and character of the guest whom he was entertaining and she was loving as Gustavus Wakefield.

"Yes, a miniature portrait," returned the duchess, in answer to Lady Desborough's ejaculatory question. "It appeared that some one had found it between the mattresses in a bedroom; and it is therefore probable that the picture had been given by the criminal to Lady Stamford, who, you may remember, was his paramour. The prince and myself both examined the portrait, and it corresponded in every respect with the description which Mr. Page had previously given of Philip Ramsey. 'What a handsome young man he must have been!' thought I to myself at the time; and I remember remarking that the noblest instead of the guiltiest feelings appeared to be stamped upon his brow. But how profoundly you sighed at that moment, Eleanor. And now the colour is coming and going upon your cheeks a dozen times in a moment."

"Do not heed my looks nor regard my manner," said the countess. "You shall know all presently, and then you will understand everything which now appears mysterious and unaccountable in my conduct. Proceed, dearest Georgiana, proceed, I implore you."

"I am now approaching the grand climax in my narrative," resumed the Duchess of Devonshire, after gazing for a few moments upon her friend with an expression of earnest curiosity and deep interest. "Having duly examined the miniature portrait and passed our observations upon it, his Royal Highness and myself retired to the chamber which had been prepared for our reception. It was the second room on the left-hand side of the long corridor — "

"The very chamber in which, as I have been told, Lady Stamford breathed her last," interjected the Countess of Desborough. "It has a dressing-room opening from one extremity, and a bathroom from the other."

"The same," rejoined the duchess. "Well, to that apartment were we escorted by Mrs. Page, whose proffered services I rejected; for there was something bold, forward, and coarse in the woman's manner which I did not at all admire. I accordingly dismissed her at once; and the prince retired

to the dressing-room while I performed my own unaided night toilet in the bedchamber. Presently his Royal Highness reappeared in a dressing-gown which Mr. Page's attention had doubtless provided; and he began to pay me some of those honeyed compliments which he knows so well how to lavish upon his favourites, when a strange noise startled us abruptly. We listened, the door of the bathroom opened, and a man appeared upon the threshold. Great Heaven! what did I see? One glance was sufficient, a scream burst from my lips, and I threw myself into the arms of the prince; for the countenance which had just met my affrighted looks was that which the miniature had already so faithfully impressed upon my memory. In a word, the criminal Philip Ramsey was there — in that chamber — before the eyes of myself and his Royal Highness."

"The criminal Philip Ramsey," murmured Eleanor, mechanically repeating the words which the duchess had used so frequently in the course of her narrative, and the mention of which pierced each time like a dagger into the heart and passed like a searing-iron over the brain of the wretched Lady Desborough.

"What is it that distresses you thus profoundly, my dearest friend?" inquired Georgiana. "Is it possible that Mr. Ramsey was known to you, that you experienced any interest in his behalf — "

"Proceed, proceed," exclaimed Eleanor, almost wildly. "I again implore you not to question me until your narrative is concluded. It is cruel, oh, it is cruel to force me to renew the same prayer so often."

"I would not wilfully afflict you, Eleanor," said the duchess, in a tone of gentle remonstrance; "and therefore your reproof is undeserved. But so long as I remain ignorant of the cause of your sorrow, I am unable to regulate the terms of my narrative in such a manner as to avoid touching that tensely drawn chord which evidently vibrates to your very heart's core."

"Pardon me, dear Georgiana, for any hasty or unkind expression on my part," said the countess, pressing her friend's hand to her lips, "and continue your history without reference to the emotions which it excites in my bosom. You were telling me how he — Philip Ramsey," — and the beauteous Eleanor pronounced the name with a shudder, —

"appeared to yourself and the prince upon the threshold of the bathroom. What followed next?"

"His Royal Highness," resumed Georgiana, "was as profoundly and as fully struck as I was by the marvellous resemblance which the individual bore to the miniature we had previously seen; but, almost instantaneously recovering his presence of mind, the prince demanded of the intruder who he was. Then the wretched man fell at our feet and made to us the astounding revelation that he was indeed none other than the selfsame Philip Ramsey whom all the world believed to have suffered death for his crimes. In deep, low, but earnest whispers — as if he were afraid that even the very echoes would thunder forth his name and the circumstances of his resuscitation — did he explain enough to convince us that he was no impostor in a drama where imposture would have been so wondrous. No, he was not deceiving us; he was the real, identical Philip Ramsey who had been the subject of Page's fears and of our discourse that very evening. Sharply, angrily, and suspiciously did the prince question him, but also speaking in a low and subdued tone; while I, bewildered and amazed, and feeling as if I were walking in a dream, had scarcely presence of mind sufficient to wrap around me the shawl which his Royal Highness threw over my half-naked form. At length I also began to question the miserable being who had fallen upon his knees before us; but my queries were swayed by a profound terror which I could not control. There was something dreadful in finding oneself face to face with a man who had risen as it were from the grave, who had passed through the hands of the public executioner, whose body had been folded in the embrace of Death, and who was nevertheless there, a living, breathing, moving, sentient being still."

"Horror! horror!" groaned Eleanor, clasping her hands together, while her countenance became more ghastly in its unearthly pallor than even when the first mention of Ramsey's name on this occasion had chased all the vital colouring from beneath the pure bistre shade of her transparent skin. "But go on, go on, Georgiana!" she exclaimed, suddenly, and with a tremendous effort to subdue the agonizing emotions that were raging in her breast.

"I see that I must make as speedy an end of my narrative

as possible," said the Duchess of Devonshire, whose curiosity and surprise were enhanced to an almost intolerable degree. "The conversation which took place between the resuscitated criminal on the one hand and the prince and myself on the other was fraught with a fearful, a terrible interest. He explained to us in a few rapid but awfully thrilling words how he had been handed over to a surgeon for dissection, how the vital spark had flickered and flamed up again, how he had fled from the abode of the medical man, and how he had found an asylum in some place which he would not name. Then he informed us that a feeling of morbid curiosity had induced him to revisit the scene of his fatal amour with the self-murdered wife of Sir Richard Stamford, and he said that, having perceived the startling effect which his appearance in the library had produced upon the Pages, he had sought refuge in the bedchamber where Lady Stamford had surrendered up her breath. There it was his intention to remain until all was quiet in the house, when he proposed to steal forth and take his departure thence. For, well aware of the influence of superstitious fears upon the mind, he fancied that of all the rooms in the manor that in which the deceased lady died was the very one which would be the last to be used by the inmates of the dwelling. It likewise appeared that when he suddenly heard the door open and persons enter that apartment, — meaning the prince and myself, escorted by Mrs. Page, — he had only just time to conceal himself in the bathroom; and when he found that the chamber was to be occupied for the night, he had resolved to come forth and throw himself upon our mercy. Such was the substance of his explanations; and when they were completed, the prince commanded him to leave the room at once. Then did a sudden change come over the man's countenance; and he said, with a malicious significancy, 'From the conversation which I have ere now overheard, I learned who this lady is,' pointing to me, 'and if I experience harsh treatment at your hands, all England shall know that the Duchess of Devonshire passed the night at Stamford Manor with the Prince of Wales.' This announcement convinced his Royal Highness in a moment that, for my sake even more than his own, was it requisite to come to terms with the resuscitated criminal; and the prince accordingly adopted a more conciliatory tone and demeanour

toward him. In fine, he exacted a pledge from his Royal Highness that when a suitable opportunity should occur, and a sufficient interval should have elapsed for the impression of his crimes to have subsided in the public mind, the prince would use his influence in the proper quarter to obtain for him a full pardon. These conditions, which Ramsey imposed, were assented to by the prince; and the resuscitated then took his departure. We must suppose that he escaped without notice or molestation from the house, inasmuch as on the following morning no sign nor word on the part of the Pages afforded the least ground for suspecting the contrary was the case. The prince's private travelling-carriage came to fetch us at the hour commanded on the preceding night; and thus ended the romantic adventure of Stamford Manor."

There was a long pause, during which the Countess of Desborough remained absorbed in the deepest reverie. She was rent by two antagonistic feelings, — the one prompting her to disburden her mind without delay of the tremendous secret that lay upon it like a weight of lead, the other urging her to conceal her amour with Ramsey as if it were a flagrant and damning crime which she had committed. But when she thought how sweet, oh, how sweet it would be to receive sympathy from the lips of a dear and valued friend, when she likewise reflected that the secret would be perfectly safe in the keeping of that friend, and when she remembered how often she had felt the pining want of a confidant into whose bosom she could pour forth the flood of her woes now so painfully pent-up in her overcharged breast, she resolved to hesitate no longer.

"My dear Georgiana," she said, taking the hand of the duchess, in whose countenance she looked with a mingled expression of shame and affliction, wounded pride and despair, "you will pity me — Oh! you will pity me, when you learn the sad truth which I have now to reveal. Your narrative was romantic and strange; mine is fraught with a wild and terrible interest. For it was in this house that Philip Ramsey found an asylum, and I — my God! — I became his victim. Now do you comprehend me?"

And the corrugated eyebrows, quivering lips, and convulsing bosom of the wretched Lady Desborough evinced the most ineffable anguish.

"Great Heaven! is this possible?" exclaimed the duchess, totally unprepared for so tremendous a revelation.

"It is possible! It has happened! It is true!" cried the countess, in a voice of despair; "and what is worse, — oh, ten thousand times worse, — my husband is acquainted with the whole hideous circumstances!"

"Unhappy Eleanor!" exclaimed the duchess; then, throwing her arms around her friend's neck, the generous-hearted Georgiana said all she could to comfort her.

"Ah! I was not wrong when I trusted in your friendship," sobbed the countess, as she wept bitterly upon the bosom of the duchess. "I knew that you would not despise me for my misfortune, that you would not loathe me on account of this crowning infamy which has become my wretched, wretched fate. No, no, you can feel for me, you can sympathize with me, you can console me! The secret of my married life was already revealed to you; and you were aware that I was pure and chaste in body, though my imagination was foul and corrupt with the cravings, and longings, and furious desires that were devouring me. Then came that man, — came at a time when all the fiercest wants of my nature had been aggravated into the famished yearnings of the strongest sensuality, by the tantalizing and unaccomplished wooings of the prince. The man came, I say, came under a fictitious name, and with a plausible tale of suffering, and friendlessness, and sorrow upon his tongue. I pitied him: he became our guest, we were thrown much together, and you can judge, because you have seen him, whether his masculine beauty was not well, too well calculated to win my heart. In a short time — yes, even in a few days — I loved him to madness — to distraction; and I surrendered myself full willingly, oh, too willingly to his arms. For a brief space did this delicious dream of paradise endure, and then it was suddenly dissipated by the rudest storm that ever broke with appalling violence upon the calm stillness of a summer's eve. An artist whom my husband had patronized brought a picture to exhibit, and that picture was the portrait of Philip Ramsey. Oh, what words can be found to describe the agony that seized upon me all in a moment? The collected tortures of ten thousand racks would have been a comparative Elysium. How I survived that terrible day, I know not!"

"And what followed?" inquired the duchess, profoundly interested in this strange narrative.

"Ramsey's immediate exile to America, and my husband's forgiveness generously vouchsafed toward myself," responded the Countess of Desborough.

"And do you love him still — I mean that man?" asked the duchess.

"Love him!" cried Eleanor, with the sudden start and changing manner of a disdainful astonishment; then, with the words hissing through her ashy lips, she added in a tone of indescribable bitterness, amounting almost to a ferocious hatred, "I abhor and detest him."

"And since he quitted England you have heard nothing of him? He has not sought to communicate with you?" said the duchess, inquiringly.

"God forbid!" ejaculated Eleanor. "I hope he is dead, and yet I am not naturally ungenerous nor cruelly inclined."

"You will pardon me for asking one more question," said Georgiana, with some little degree of hesitation. "Have you not endeavoured to console yourself with another lover?"

"No, on my soul, no!" exclaimed the countess, the blood now rushing back to her cheeks. "There was a time," she continued more calmly and slowly, "when I experienced toward my husband sentiments that bordered even upon aversion; but if he were guilty of a wrong toward me in making me his wife, the outrage which my amour constituted toward himself was ten thousand times more flagrant. Our positions therefore changed; and instead of it being for me to pardon, 'twas for me to implore his forgiveness. And that forgiveness he gave even before it was sought; spontaneously it flowed from his really generous and lofty soul. Think you, then, Georgiana, that I am ungrateful for such conduct as this? Think you that I would prove an ingrate for so much noble-mindedness evinced toward myself? No, oh, no, it were impossible! I have learned to restrain my desires, to put a curb upon the longings of an ardent temperament, and to do my duty as a wife. Therefore was it that I felt annoyed and vexed when your thoughtlessness might have so seriously compromised me with Lord Florimel."

"But was it not strange that the earl should have become the purchaser of Stamford Manor?" inquired the duchess,

" knowing, as he must have done, that it was a scene so peculiarly associated with the misdeeds of Philip Ramsey? "

" He was already in treaty for the property before the tremendous exposure took place," answered the countess; " and he had even paid a deposit as an earnest of the bargain. After the fatal discovery, he consulted me upon the subject, and offered to forego the transaction. But I was anxious to give him a proof of that strength of mind which should regulate and influence my future actions; and I therefore not only urged him to complete the business, but so soon as it was concluded I was the first to propose that we should visit our new property."

In this manner did the Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Desborough continue to discourse upon the various subjects that engrossed their interest; and after having remained for nearly three hours with her friend, the brilliant Georgiana took her leave.

Not ten minutes had elapsed from the moment that her Grace's carriage drove away from the door, when a servant entered the apartment, bearing a letter. Having presented it to the countess, the footman retired, and Eleanor, whom the incident had aroused from a reverie of deep and painful thought, glanced at the superscription.

Were it possible for an arrow suddenly to traverse the brain, inflicting only a poignant torture without killing its victim upon the spot, we might readily conceive its effect to be that which the first glimpse of the handwriting of this letter's address produced upon Lady Desborough. She started violently, she was thrilled with the spasm of a mortal terror that shot through her entire frame from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet.

Then, as if suspense were worse than even the realization of the appalling suspicion that had flashed up into vivid vitality in her mind, she tore the letter frantically open. But one glance at its contents was sufficient; her fingers relaxed their hold upon the paper, her brain was seized with a sudden reeling, her sight became dizzy, and, covering her face with her hands, she groaned murmuringly, " My God! my God! what will become of me? "

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE REUNITED FRIENDS

We must now introduce our readers to the abode of Lady Lade in King Street, St. James's.

It was in the evening of the same day on which the incidents just related took place, and the Amazon was seated in her dining-room, with her old friend and paramour, Tim Meagles. The dessert and wine were upon the table; but they remained almost entirely untouched, for the couple, thus reunited, were fully absorbed in the discussion of the many topics which interested them.

The beautiful huntress was now apparelled in widow's weeds. Her magnificent hair no longer fell in a thousand ringlets over her shoulders. It was arranged in the simple style suitable to her mourning garb, and was nearly altogether concealed by the snowy cap which she was compelled to wear. The sable dress set off her fine shape to a somewhat less advantage than the male attire which was wont to develop her well-formed limbs in a manner so comparatively undisguised and exciting; but still the admirer of the sex who had never seen her in her Amazonian garb would not have been very willing to admit that she could possibly have improved by any change of raiment that appearance which she presented in her costume of widowhood. For the fashion of the day allowed the body of the dress to be so low and open in front that it revealed the luxuriant richness of that bust which the tight-fitting frock coat had concealed altogether; and those who were wont to admire the superb slope of her shoulders could now contemplate their dazzling whiteness into the bargain.

Although the impressions were still fresh and vivid which

had been made upon her by Sir John Lade's sudden death, and which had fastened upon her mind when the tidings of that event were conveyed to her in the sponging-house, and although her present discourse with Tim Meagles was of a grave and serious nature, yet was there a certain roguish archness in the expression of her features which contrasted singularly enough with the mourning cap that imprisoned her handsome countenance. This charming wickedness of look had become so habitual to her that she could not possibly divest herself of it, even if she had tried. It flashed from her magnificent dark eyes, glowed upon her carnation cheeks, and shone in the half-smile that no seriousness of thought or circumstance could banish completely from her full red lips.

Her friend and companion Tim Meagles was but little altered in personal appearance; his countenance was slightly weather-beaten, and that was the only visible effect his voyage had produced upon him. He was dressed in precisely the same dashing style which has already been made so familiar to our readers, — the sporting coat, the white corduroys, the lapping waistcoat, and the top-boots. His auburn whiskers were as well curled as ever, and perhaps a trifle larger; and his bright red hair was parted with that studied negligence which threw its wavy masses up in such a manner as to give an advantageous elongation to the appearance of the head. His linen was scrupulously clean; his neckerchief was tied with characteristic fastidiousness; and across his hat upon the sideboard lay the almost inseparable riding-whip.

But the countenance of Tim Meagles wore a gravity of expression that might almost be termed ominous. Nor was this to be wondered at; for on arriving in London on the previous evening, he had received from Letitia Lade a full account of all that had transpired during his absence. She had told him how she had discovered that the prince was the author of his expatriation, and how his lodgings had been ransacked and the important documents taken away. She freely explained to him how she had visited his Royal Highness and become the partner of his bed in order to regain possession of the papers; and she likewise made him acquainted with the manner in which the heir apparent had once more recovered those documents, and how he had

warned and menaced herself with regard to the consequences of any future molestation which she might offer him.

Already smarting under the cruel and ingrate treatment which he had received from the prince, and arriving in London with a burning desire for revenge, Meagles's spirits were not raised by the details of Lady Lade's narrative. He had built his plans upon the hope of finding the papers secure and safe in the possession of the Amazon, whom he knew to be well aware of the place where he was wont to keep them at his lodgings; but this hope was destroyed by the recital which, on his return to London, he heard from her lips.

This narrative, as we have above stated, was given on the evening previous to that on which we now introduce our readers to Lady Letitia's abode. Meagles had returned to his lodgings in Jermyn Street, where Mrs. Piggleberry went into hysterics of joy at beholding him again. Her first floor had never been let since he was forced to leave England; and he therefore resumed possession of the apartments. His property was all safe in Mrs. Piggleberry's care; the Amazon had taken charge of his horses during his absence; and the volatile Wasp, who was likewise rejoiced to welcome his master safe back again, returned to his service. Lady Lade's purse was open to him; and thus in many respects we find our friend Tim restored to the same position which he occupied when the prince's treachery sent him all on a sudden out of the country.

During the morning after the night of his arrival in London, he had called at the lodgings which Melmoth and his family occupied in Westminster when he first knew them; but the faint hope that he had entertained of hearing some tidings in that quarter relative to the fate of the working man, his wife, and children was disappointed. He was therefore ignorant whether Melmoth had succeeded in effecting his escape on that memorable night when he committed himself to the mercy of the Thames off Woolwich, or whether he had perished in the endeavour to avoid expatriation. He had likewise called at Mrs. Brace's establishment in Pall Mall to make inquiries concerning Rose Foster, whose image had ever remained uppermost in his mind; but his queries experienced nought save abrupt and cold negatives. Then, in the afternoon, he had repaired to the abode of Lady Lade,

with whom he had promised to dine; and we therefore now behold the reunited couple sitting together over the almost untasted dessert, and discussing the various topics arising from past occurrences, especially those which the Amazon's history of the preceding evening had developed.

"And thus," observed Meagles, after a long pause, "every one of our grand hopes has been knocked down and annihilated."

"It would seem so, Tim," replied the widow. Then, smiling outright for the first time that evening, she said, archly, "Fate has determined that you are not to be a duke, and that I am therefore never to be a duchess."

"And all through the accursed treachery, ingratitude, and perfidy of that scoundrel prince," added Meagles, bitterly.

"Is your rancour so absorbing that you could not even give me some other hope, Tim," said Lady Lade, the sunny smile still lingering upon her lips, "even though you cannot make me a duchess?"

"My dear Letitia, you are an excellent friend to me," answered Meagles; "and I ought to do anything and everything I can to please you. But you will admit that neither of us can be in a humour to discuss future plans, unless it be the mode of carrying out that vengeance which we are both determined to wreak upon the prince."

"And yet you must give me one assurance, Tim," said the widow, looking absolutely enchanting as she spoke. "I intend to wear this garb," she added, glancing down at her mourning dress, "precisely one year, as a mark of respect to the memory of a man who was too good to such a worthless, ungrateful wife as I proved toward him. But at the expiration of that time — "

"You and I will be made one," responded Meagles, touched by the devotion of this woman who was rich and independent, but who with all her faults remained faithful to her affection for him, altered though his prospects were.

"That assurance is all that I require, Tim," she observed; "and in the meantime I intend that we shall be upon the best possible behaviour with regard to each other, — excellent friends, and nothing more. Now, you understand what I mean," she added, with an arch smile and a deepening of the carnation upon her cheeks. "I am a singular, wayward, eccentric creature, and I have resolved

to remain more faithful to Sir John's memory for a year after his death, than ever I was during any one single week of his lifetime. That is my fantasy; or rather, it is my way of showing as much gratitude as I can for all the kindnesses he heaped upon me. Perhaps there is also a slight tinge of remorse in the matter — But never mind," she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting herself, while a tear glistened in her eye, like a rain-drop upon a sloe in the sunshine. "You comprehend my meaning, and it shall be an agreement between us, Tim, shall it not?"

"To be sure, my beauty, since you wish it," returned Meagles, patting the cheek down which that pearly tear was now slowly tracing its way like another rain-drop over a peach of the deepest vermeil dye.

"Now, is this the way you commence the performance of your part of the agreement?" she exclaimed, laughing with something like that joyousness of tone which used to sound like a blithe harmony in Meagles's ears. "But I am really serious, Tim," she observed, her manner suddenly becoming grave, and even determined; "and therefore nothing more than a kiss at meeting and another at parting until the expiration of the year. And then —"

"And then — what?" asked Meagles, recovering somewhat of his own former gaiety, as he looked with a sly significance into the depths of the widow's splendid black eyes.

"And then — any thing you choose," she answered, drawing back her chair to avoid another patting of the cheek which her companion seemed inclined to bestow upon her.

"Well, my beauty," he said, laughing, "you shall rule me in all things; for, as I just now observed, you have been a good and kind friend to me, and absence has not made you forget me."

And as Meagles gave utterance to these words, he inwardly vowed to renounce all idea of seeking any more after Rose Foster; for he could not feel otherwise than touched by the conduct of Lady Lade toward him. Nevertheless, as he came to that resolve, he could not help heaving a sigh at the sacrifice he was thus making to a sense of gratitude; for he had never experienced toward the Amazon any other feeling than that of friendship mingled with the attachment which belongs to a sensual fruition.

"You sigh, Tim," she observed. "Have you anything upon your mind with which I am unacquainted?"

"Nothing, I can assure you," he exclaimed, suddenly forcing himself to seem cheerful. "But all these matters with which you are acquainted are enough to drive a fellow wild with vexation. To think that some few months ago — weeks I may say — the prince was so completely in our power; and now he is thoroughly out of our clutches. Because all the secrets which we know of are useless as weapons to wield against him, without the documentary evidence to support the verbal assertion of those facts."

"What course, then, do you propose to adopt?" inquired the Amazon; "for revenged upon him we must and will be, even if we gain no really solid and substantial advantage. What do you think of making use of the Marquis of Saint Croix, who, as I told you last night, cannot obtain a single shilling from the prince, and who has been dunning him, at my instigation, for some weeks past?"

"But how can we make any use of him beyond what you have already done in that respect?" asked Meagles.

"Persuade him to publish a pamphlet containing a full statement of his case," replied the widow.

"Well, we may do that," said her companion; "but I want a far more substantial revenge, — a revenge which shall proceed directly, and not indirectly, from ourselves, and which the prince nevertheless could not adopt as a pretext for punishing us."

"Watch all his movements, Tim," suggested Lady Lade; "and depend upon it, you will find him out in some prank the circumstances of which we may turn to our own purposes. Who knows but that we might once more get him into our power?"

"True! The advice is excellent," observed Meagles. "From what you told me last night and from the inquiries which I was enabled to make this morning, it is pretty clear that he and his wife, the princess, are already on queer terms with each other. Such at least is the current rumour, founded on little incidents that have oozed out even from the innermost privacy of Carlton House; and the report is pretty well confirmed by what a friend of mine who is connected with the opera, and whom I accidently met this morning, confidentally whispered in my ear."

"To what effect was his communication?" inquired the widow.

"That the prince had three of the new dancing-girls at Carlton House last night," returned Meagles; "and one of them remained with him until the morning. It is therefore pretty evident that he is still pursuing the old game."

"And hence the greater encouragement for you to adopt the course which I have suggested, and keep a watch upon his movements and proceedings so far as you can," observed Lady Lade. "You are so well acquainted with his habits and pursuits, the faces of all the frequenters of Carlton House are so familiar to you, and you are so quick at drawing the most important deductions from the slightest incidents, that you could scarcely fail to discover, sooner or later, something that may be turned to our advantage. What do you really think of my suggestion?"

"The longer I reflect upon it, the better I am pleased with it," rejoined Meagles. "Come, we will give up moping and desponding, Letitia," he exclaimed, a sudden brightness overspreading his countenance, "and we will drink success to our schemes. Here, my beauty, pledge me in a bumper."

And Meagles, having filled two glasses with claret, handed one to his fair companion.

"Well, I cannot refuse to pledge you in that toast, Tim," she observed, with a smile; and the next moment her empty glass was set down upon the table.

"Now perhaps you will take a weed, my harum-scarum?" said Meagles, presenting his cigar-case.

"No, not until my year's mourning shall have expired, Tim," answered the widow. "You must tempt me into nothing wrong, you know," she added, with a laugh which revealed the two rows of large but splendid teeth.

"And in order to avoid leading you into temptation, my beauty," said Meagles, rising from his chair, "I will take a stroll while I smoke my cigar. It is now eight o'clock," he observed, after consulting his watch, "and I will this very night commence operations with a ramble about the vicinage of Carlton House for an hour or so."

"You will return to supper, Tim?" said the widow, as he took up his hat to depart.

"Assuredly, my charmer," responded Meagles; "and I leave my whip as the security for my return."

Then, stepping close up to the Amazon, he threw his arms around her neck and imprinted a kiss upon her moist red mouth.

"Heydey! what does this mean?" she cried, affecting an angry look, as she arranged the cap which the abruptness of the proceeding had somewhat disturbed.

"Did you not promise a kiss at meeting and another at parting on every occasion?" demanded Meagles, laughing with all the joyousness of former times.

"Oh, that is the interpretation you put upon my words, eh, Master Tim?" exclaimed the lady, her own hilarious tones now echoing the merriment of her friend. "Well, I suppose I must suffer you to have your own way in that respect, at all events. And now take yourself off without further delay, so that you may return all the earlier to enjoy your supper —"

"And likewise the kiss at meeting again," added Meagles, still laughing as he quitted the room.

Then, having lighted his cigar in the hall, he sallied forth upon his evening ramble.

CHAPTER XL

A SCENE IN A DARK AVENUE

TAKING the nearest cut to St. James's Park, and enjoying his Havana with a more than ordinary zest, — for his spirits had risen almost to their former tone, now that he had adopted some settled proceeding with regard to the prince, — Tim Meagles entered the long avenue shaded by trees and generally known as the Mall. He walked up and down three or four times in front of Carlton House, and looked wistfully up at the windows blazing with light, as if he would have given some of the best years of his existence to be enabled to catch a glimpse of what was passing within that palatial residence.

Suddenly a man, of tall stature, enveloped in a cloak and with his hat drawn over his countenance, hurried past; and it instantaneously struck Meagles that the figure, just as it now appeared in its disguise, was not unknown to him. The light of a lamp in front of Carlton House had enabled him to observe how carefully the individual was wrapped up in that capacious mantle, and how studiously the face was concealed by the hat. A moment afterward and the man had disappeared from his view, plunging as it were into the obscurity of the adjacent avenue. So hurriedly had the individual passed that he had not appeared to notice Meagles at all.

For a few moments Tim stopped short, took the cigar from his mouth, and murmured to himself, "Where on earth have I seen that figure before?" Then, with the vividness of an inspiration, did it flash to his memory that he had beheld the individual on board the *Diana* frigate.

"Yes, it is the same, — Mr. Gustavus Wakefield, the merchant," he said to himself, as the remembrance struck

him; "the individual who came on board from the pirate ship, along with Joe Warren and Stephen Price, and who is to be a witness against those fellows. Well, I never once caught a glimpse of his countenance all the time he was on board the *Diana*. There is something strange and mysterious about him; else wherefore should he have remained in such strict seclusion in his cabin at sea? And why, on a warm evening like this, should he go about enveloped in that huge cloak? It is singular — very singular!"

And having thus mused upon the matter, Tim Meagles replaced the cigar between his lips and mechanically struck into the avenue in the same direction which Philip Ramsey — for he indeed it was — had just taken.

Sauntering leisurely along, smoking his cigar, and allowing his thoughts to wander from the incident that had just occurred to other subjects, Meagles had soon ceased to devote any particular attention to the appearance of the disguised one; and he was pondering upon the generous character of the profligate Amazon and the winning beauty of the amiable Rose Foster, when the rapid advance of footsteps struck upon his ear. All that line of pathway which skirted the railings of the enclosure was enveloped in total darkness, for the evening, though warm, was cloudy and starless, and the few thinly scattered oil-lamps facing the house on the other side of the Mall reached not with their inefficient beams even half-across the several avenues of trees.

On hearing the footsteps approach, their rapid tread instantaneously brought back the incident of the cloaked figure to the mind of Meagles; and, concealing in his hand the lighted end of the cigar, he sat down upon a bench placed against the trunk of a tree, his person being thereby absorbed as it were in the deepest of the deep shades which obscured the avenue. For one of those vague and unaccountable impulses of curiosity which amount almost to a presentiment had now seized upon him; and his attention being reawakened in respect to the individual whom he only knew by the name of Gustavus Wakefield, he resolved to take note of his proceedings.

Scarcely had he stationed himself under the tree, when a form, darker than the darkness, passed rapidly by; and the shape of the figure was sufficiently discernible to enable

Meagles to identify it with the one he had previously seen. In less than a minute the rapid footsteps suddenly ceased; and the sounds of voices, low and murmuring, reached the ears of Meagles.

"The mysterious Mr. Wakefield has an appointment, doubtless," thought Tim within himself; "and he has just encountered the person whom he came here to meet. But, ah, they are approaching this way!"

Such was indeed the case, as the footsteps now announced; but the voices had altogether ceased. Meagles slipped behind the tree in order to keep watch with the greater certainty of being unobserved; and in a few moments the cloaked one, accompanied by the person who had just joined him, came and seated themselves upon the very bench which Meagles had the instant before abandoned.

They now began to speak again, and Tim discovered that the psuedo Mr. Gustavus Wakefield's companion was a female.

"You received my note, and you have kept the appointment which I gave you," said Ramsey, in a low whispering tone, but which was perfectly audible to the listener stationed behind the tree.

"Yes, I received your note, and I have come to the appointment," responded the Countess of Desborough, for she it was; and the voice in which she spoke was marked with the unnatural calmness that evinced a terrible inward struggle to subdue an outburst of painful, perhaps agonizing emotions. "But wherefore have you sought to disturb my peace, — you, for whom I have already suffered so much?"

"Then am I to understand that everything is at an end between us," demanded Ramsey, "and that you now hate as deeply as you once loved me?"

"Suffice it for you to know that I repent bitterly, bitterly of the past," returned Eleanor, in a profound tone, "and that if you have any regard for my happiness you will bring this interview to as speedy a termination as possible."

"Your words, haughty and cruel lady, afford the fullest and completest explanation which it is possible for you to give with regard to the present state of your feelings toward me. How changed then," continued Ramsey, in a tone which rather partook of spiteful upbraiding than of gentle

remonstrance, "how changed, then, has become the once loving and yielding Countess of Desborough — "

"Hush, breathe not my name, I implore you!" interrupted the lady, in a voice full of terror and anguish. "We may be overheard, listeners may approach stealthily through the deep obscurity of this avenue — "

"There is no danger of that," said Ramsey. "Let us continue to speak in a low tone and with as little excitement as possible; and the sounds of any approaching footsteps will convey their own warning to our ears. I was observing, then, that the once adoring and tender lady who was ready to abandon home, husband, rank, station, and everything for the man to whom she had pledged her love is now so changed that she even grudges him an interview of a few minutes, — she who was wont to think that even hours passed away too rapidly when spent with me."

"Alas! you know it is not my fault," said the countess, in a trembling tone, "if fearful circumstances occurred to cast a blight upon that love which I do not deny having devoted to you."

"And had you never learned that the false Gustavus Wakefield was the resuscitated criminal Philip Ramsey," observed the man, with a horrible bitterness in his accents, whisperingly low though they were, "you would have continued to love on to the end?"

"Your words fill me with a dread which is almost overwhelming," said the countess, her voice broken by half-strangling gasps and convulsions of terror. "My God! if we were overheard? What would become of you? What would the world think of me?"

"I care but little what may happen to myself," returned Ramsey, affecting a deep despondency of tone, "now that you have annihilated all the fond hopes which I had ventured to build up during my absence."

"Hopes!" ejaculated the countess, in accents full of alarm. "What hopes could you have conceived? And wherefore have you returned to England? Do you not dread my husband's wrath, should he discover that you have thus acted in contravention of his commands?"

"Your husband will not dare to give publicity to a narrative that must expose his wife's shame while inflicting ruin upon me," answered Ramsey; "and I was an idiot at the

time to suffer my fears so far to prevail over my reason and common sense as to drive me into that banishment which the Earl of Desborough enjoined as the sole condition of his forbearance."

"But should my husband happen to encounter you," said the lady, "he might adopt in a sudden paroxysm of rage that extreme course which in his calmer moments he would doubtless deplore."

"I thank you for your advice," observed Ramsey, in a cold tone; "but you will permit me to be the best judge of my own actions. Nevertheless," he immediately added, with the sudden assumption of a kinder tone, "I do not wish to speak harshly to you. Just now you appeared astonished and incredulous that I should have cherished any hope with regard to you; but I had a firmer faith and a stronger reliance in woman's love than the result has justified. I flattered myself that if your heart were really mine, no possible circumstances could have altered the state of your affections, no human influence could have converted that love into hatred. I thought that you would have become my guardian genius and my good angel, pitying me for the past, and aiding me in my endeavour to make all possible atonement by my conduct in future. I had buoyed myself up with the idea that your love would rise superior to all earthly influences, no matter how terrible they might have proved. But I have been mistaken; and the very tone in which you addressed me when we met ere now, and the recoil which you made from my outstretched arms, convinced me in a moment that I had nothing to expect or anticipate of all the bright visions which imagination had conjured up while away."

"You speak as if you at least still entertained generous feelings toward me," murmured the countess. "Be truly generous, then, and let this interview cease at once. For I will not hesitate to declare that it is painful — very painful to me. Besides, the forgiveness of a noble-hearted husband imposes upon me certain duties which I would not violate."

"I perceive by your tone that I have indeed become an object of dread aversion to the woman who once loved me so enthusiastically, and whom I still love so devotedly," said Ramsey, throwing into his accents a tremulous pathos so well simulated that the countess could not for a single moment suspect its sincerity. "You ask me to be generous,

and I will prove so to the extent of my power. Grant me, then, one favour, one last boon, and I will afterward bid you farewell for ever."

"And that boon, that favour?" said the countess, catching eagerly at the hope of disembarrassing herself eternally of a man for whom she did indeed entertain a horrible aversion and an intense loathing, although her fears induced her to conceal those sentiments as much as she was able.

"The boon which I crave," returned Ramsey, "is that you will afford me the opportunity of gazing once more — and only for a few brief minutes — upon that wondrous beauty which has become so impressed upon my mind as to form as it were a portion of my very memory itself. Let me see your countenance in all the splendour of its loveliness, let me gaze upon your form, apparelled in the garb best calculated to display the glory of its perfection."

"You are mad! you are raving!" murmured the countess, the hope which had so recently sprung up in her mind now changing to poignant alarm. "How can I grant you such an opportunity as you demand? To be enabled to come forth alone this evening, enveloped in a plain cloak and with this simple straw bonnet upon my head, I have been compelled to invent excuses the repetition of which would rouse the most unpleasant suspicions not only in the mind of my husband, but likewise in the breasts of my servants. How, then, can you suppose it possible for me to grant the strange and childish request which you have made? Oh, be generous toward me, be generous, I implore you; and I will henceforth think of you as kindly as I can!"

"I have set my heart upon the condition which I have named," said Ramsey, "and the fulfilment of which shall be instantaneously followed by my departure from London — never to return. It may be a foolish whim on my part, it may be a silly fantasy; but I cannot renounce the only gleam of happiness which I may be destined to enjoy in this life. Grant me, then, the boon that I crave; and I swear that you shall experience nought save the most profound respect at my hands. Did I seek to gratify my own inclinations at the expense of your feelings, I should even now fling my arms around you and fold you in my embrace. But I do not permit even the skirt of my cloak to touch yours. Through the obscurity of the evening I saw just now that you recoiled

from me when we first met; and not for worlds would I lay a finger upon the hand which has so often been pressed to my lips. Consider this present forbearance on my part as a guarantee and an earnest of the same reverential respect when you grant me a last meeting that I may gaze once more upon the face and form which have ravished my senses ever since we first encountered each other. Refuse not, then, the boon which will shed one single gleam of joyous light upon the dark pathway that I must henceforth pursue in this world. I do not ask for much, I seek to take no advantage of all that has occurred between us, I want nothing from you but the favour which you can so easily grant, and which I shall esteem so highly. Now, what is your decision?"

"Do you solemnly and sacredly swear, by the great God who is above us, that you will never molest me more, if I accede to your present demand?" said the Countess of Desborough, after a long pause.

"I swear by all I deem holy and divine!" was Ramsey's unhesitating response. "And I swear in addition that I will not even cast upon you a look that shall be fraught with any other sentiment than that of the profoundest respect."

"But will it not suffice if I appear to-morrow, in the broad sunlight, in Hyde Park, apparelled in my most becoming vesture, and riding in my carriage?" asked the noble lady.

"Ah! is not such a question a veritable mockery of my present position," exclaimed Ramsey, "doomed as I am to creep about in disguise and only when darkness is upon the face of the earth?"

"True," said the countess, in a musing tone. "But where can such an interview as that which you propose take place? I would not for worlds make confidants of any friends for the purpose of meeting you at their house; you cannot come to Berkeley Square; and I will not repair to any stranger's abode."

"Then what course will you adopt?" demanded Ramsey. "I can suggest nothing."

"Will you really insist upon this foolish proceeding?" said the countess in an imploring tone. "Consider all the difficulties, all the embarrassments, all the perils of the position in which you will place me, merely to gratify this caprice on your part."

"And will you not consider the sacrifice which I make

in abandoning for ever all claim upon your affection?" cried Ramsey. "But let us not reargue the point — "

"Hush! speak not so loud. I implore you," murmured Lady Desborough. "You are decided, I perceive, and therefore I must succumb to your demand;" then, after a minute's reflection, she said, "Are you aware that the earl has become the purchaser of Stamford Manor?"

"I learned that circumstance last evening," returned Ramsey, "when making guarded and cautious inquiries whether you were in town at the present time, so that I might be assured of my letter reaching you in safety."

"And should you feel any repugnance to visiting Stamford Manor for the few minutes during which the interview you require would last?"

"Were the place inhabited by fiends, I would cheerfully hasten thither for such a purpose," answered the resuscitated.

"Then let the appointment be at Stamford Manor," said the countess. "You, who know it well, are aware that there is a private door at the back of the house communicating with a staircase, at the head of which there is a suite of small apartments. In the parlour of that suite will I receive you for five minutes to-morrow evening at nine o'clock punctually. It is fortunate," added Lady Desborough in a musing tone, "that the earl has proposed to return to the manor in the morning."

"Thanks — ten thousand thanks for this kindness on your part!" exclaimed Ramsey. "And you will be attired in your most charming vesture — "

"Yes, yes; whatever I promise I will fulfill," cried the countess. "See that you prove equally faithful in accomplishing your part of the compact, which is, never more to seek me after to-morrow night."

"I have pledged my oath, and I shall keep it," answered the resuscitated criminal.

"To-morrow night, then, at nine o'clock you may visit the manor in the way that I have described," said Eleanor. "You will find the key of the private door inside the bowl which the statue of Bacchus grasps in his hand. That statue is near the gate of the back garden, which will be unlocked."

"I am acquainted with every feature of the place," observed Ramsey; "and at nine punctually shall I avail myself of your kind permission."

"You have now nothing more to say to me?" inquired Eleanor, her voice evincing the anxiety which she felt to depart.

"Nothing, unless it be to renew my thanks for the favour which you have shown to my request," answered Ramsey.

The Countess of Desborough vouchsafed no rejoinder to these words, but hurried away in the direction of the nearest issue from the park.

"Arrogant and haughty woman!" exclaimed Ramsey, aloud, giving vent to his triumphant and vindictive feelings the moment he was assured that the countess was beyond ear-shot; "you have fallen into the trap that has been so skilfully baited to ensnare you. My assumed pathos told admirably, my affected devotion to your image was a sublime touch of policy. You deemed me sincere: there was a moment when you were even moved yourself. Oh, had you flung yourself into my arms the first instant that we met, I should have been melted into a softness that would not have permitted me to injure a hair of your head. You might have robbed me of my sting; but you have chosen to excite my venomous rancour. You could have disarmed me of all evil purposes, — yes, you could have reduced me to a condition of feminine weakness; but you have now rendered me as remorseless as a tiger. And after all, noble countess, I would sooner sell thee to the prince as the price of my pardon, than enjoy thy love again and live in terror of returning to that scaffold through the ordeal of which I have passed scatheless once. But now let me speed to Carlton House and communicate my success to the prince."

Having thus given audible utterance to his thoughts, Philip Ramsey rose from the bench and hurried along the avenue in the direction of Carlton House.

The first impulse of Meagles was to follow, in order to assure himself that the resuscitated criminal did actually visit the palatial dwelling of the prince; but recollecting that the man had given expression to his intentions when believing himself to be unheard by a living soul, Tim saw no necessity for acquiring any further evidence on that score. He accordingly retraced his way with all possible despatch to the Amazon's abode in King Street.

And need we say that Meagles was deeply astonished at all that had this evening met his ears? Need we state how

difficult he had found it to restrain a sudden start or cry of wonder, when the almost incredible fact of Ramsey's resuscitation had smitten his ears as he stood concealed behind the tree? So tremendous indeed was his amazement at this discovery, that the circumstance of the brilliant Lady Desborough having been the criminal's paramour was comparatively of little interest, startling as this fact would have appeared if revealed alone. For the countess had always enjoyed an untarnished reputation; and Meagles had invariably heard her spoken of as a bright exception to the average standard of morality amongst the female aristocracy.

Profoundly interesting, then, was the tale which he had to carry back to Lady Lade, who little anticipated that the very first experiment to which her suggestion had been put would produce such great results. Prolific indeed, however, had proved the initiative ramble of Meagles in the vicinity of Carlton House; for it was impossible to mistake the treacherous designs which Ramsey entertained toward Lady Desborough. In fact, it was apparent from the thoughts to which he had so unguardedly given audible expression, that the whole proceeding was nothing more or less than a stratagem adopted with a view to place the countess in the power of the Prince of Wales.

"Now, my dear Tim," exclaimed the Amazon, who certainly upon the present occasion appeared to be the most joyous widow that ever wore weeds, "you see that my hint was a good one. Who knows what may result from the important secrets which you have learned this evening?"

"Let us deliberate calmly upon the course which we ought to pursue," said Meagles. "It is quite clear that this Ramsey has somehow or another obtained a hold upon the prince, from whom he expects his pardon in return for throwing the Countess of Desborough into his arms."

"Well, let us sit down to supper and then chat at our ease," observed Lady Lade. "But I say, Tim, what does this mean? You have actually kissed me seven times since you came in."

"It is a relief to my feelings which can scarcely contain themselves for joy, my beauty," replied Meagles, with a merry laugh.

"If this be the way in which you keep an agreement, Master Tim," said the handsome widow, with an arch smile

upon her rich red lips, " I must beware how I place too much confidence in you. Come, sir, sit down, not too near me, if you please, and do the honours of the table."

And thus, in the most jocular mood and hilarious humour, did the Amazon and Tim Meagles place themselves at the board on which the most social of all repasts was served up.

CHAPTER XLI

THE APPOINTMENT

At an early hour on the following morning, the Earl and Countess of Desborough left town for Stamford Manor.

During the ride the charming Eleanor battled as well as she was able against the dispiriting influence of the thoughts that were uppermost in her mind, and against the vague presentiments of evil which were ever and anon recurring to torture her soul. She assumed a cheerfulness which she was very far from experiencing in reality, and which did not altogether deceive her husband; but he was very far from divining the true cause of that mental depression over which she endeavoured to throw the sunlight of her smiles and the witching charm of her conversational powers. He did not, however, suffer her to perceive that he noticed the glitter of uneasiness in her superb dark eyes, or the occasional sickliness into which her smiles merged; for he had made it a rule never to seek to penetrate her private thoughts, but to wait patiently until she might choose to reveal them.

They arrived at Stamford Manor to luncheon; and the earl afterward mounted his horse to ride over the estate until dinner-time. Eleanor then retired to her own chamber, where she penned a letter, which she concealed in her bosom. She next procured a pistol and a dagger from the earl's apartment; and, having satisfied herself that the former was loaded and the latter well pointed, she repaired to the suite of rooms of which she had spoken to Ramsey.

There was a communication between these apartments and the interior of the mansion, as well as with the garden by means of the staircase. The rooms were three in number: the first, which was also nearest to the staircase, was furnished as a parlour, the central one as a bedchamber, and

the third as a dressing-closet, or boudoir if the occupant were a lady. The traditions of Stamford Manor recorded that this suite of apartments had been inhabited by Hannah Lightfoot, the Quakeress, during her sojourn there about thirty-seven years previously to the time of which we are writing.

It was into these rooms that Lady Desborough now made her way; and in the drawer of a piece of furniture in the parlour did she conceal the pistol and dagger. She then descended the staircase, passed out into the garden by the door at the bottom, and took the key with her. This she placed in the cup which a statue of the God of Wine, standing on a pedestal near the garden-gate, held in its hand. Lastly she took away the key of the garden-gate itself, so that it might not be locked as usual after dusk.

These arrangements having been accomplished, the Countess of Desborough walked in the garden and the shrubbery, to court the solitude which was now most congenial to her soul. She thought on many, many things, but principally the event of the approaching evening; and as her mind was active in its painful meditations, the time passed by more rapidly than it usually does in hours of anxiety, nervousness, and sorrow.

At five o'clock she reëntered the mansion, and proceeded to her own room to dress for dinner. The apparel she chose was elegant and tasteful: it was white watered silk beautifully trimmed with lace looped up with roses. Although her complexion was olive, yet was it so transparent and delicate in its tinge of bistre, that it was by no means unsuited for that white dress; and as the excitement of her mind had deepened upon her cheeks the rich carnation hue that glowed through the diaphanous skin, the general effect was captivating in the extreme.

Her hair, soft as silk and of velvet blackness, hung in massive tresses upon her polished shoulders; and the low corsage of the dress revealed sufficient of the well-proportioned bust to show that it retained all the roundness and freshness of youth. For be it remembered that Lady Desborough was only in her twenty-ninth year; and at that age a woman of well-preserved charms is in all the glory of her beauty.

A wreath of white roses set off the sable darkness and raven glossiness of her hair; and the ornaments that clasped the

arms, which were naked to the shoulders, assisted to display their admirable symmetry by outlining their modelled roundness. Altogether the Countess of Desborough appeared on the present occasion to an advantage which rendered her a woman for whom the misanthrope would consent to live, and for whom the chivalrous champion would hesitate not to die.

When the dinner was served up at six o'clock, the earl was somewhat surprised to behold the more than usual care which his beauteous wife had evidently bestowed upon her toilet, considering that they were alone together. For although Eleanor invariably dressed with a richness becoming her position and an elegance in accord with her refined taste, yet she was not accustomed to appear in the vesture suited to a grand party when there was no company to receive at all. But she hastened to observe " that she thought it not unlikely their friends the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire would visit the manor in the evening, as she believed they had intended to leave London that morning in order to pass a few days at their villa in the neighbourhood."

This excuse — and an invented one it really was — appeared quite natural to the earl, who was moreover too proud of his splendid countess to think of being dissatisfied at any unusual carefulness of toilet which had the effect of enhancing the glory of her charms.

The dinner passed, the dessert was placed upon the table, and Eleanor partook of a glass or two of wine, which increased the animation that mental excitement had imparted to her cheeks. She remained conversing with the earl until about half-past eight; and then she retired to her own chamber, while he withdrew to the library.

When alone in her bedroom, the countess looked in the mirror and saw that the carnation had deepened upon her cheeks and that the fire of her eyes was more than ordinarily lustrous. Indeed, she could not fail to observe that she was brilliantly beautiful on this occasion; and she now began to regret that she had taken so much pains to enhance the natural effect of her loveliness by the auxiliaries of the toilet. Let not the reader, however, imagine that it was art which had shed the hue of the carnation upon her cheek; no, 'twas the natural bloom of vigorous health which the wine had deepened into a ruddier glow.

But we said that she regretted the pains she had taken to set off the brilliancy of her charms to the utmost advantage. Yes, she regretted it now that the dreaded moment was approaching; for might not Philip Ramsey be tempted by her appearance to pass the bounds of that reverential discretion and respectful forbearance which he had promised to observe? Ah! if he dared, had she not provided weapons wherewith to defend herself? And was she not resolved to use them in a case of emergency, at all risks and in defiance of all consequences? Ay, and had she not nerved herself by means of the stimulating influence of wine to play the part of a heroine, if need should be?

As these reflections traversed her mind, the momentary regret was dissipated; and in its place arose a feeling of satisfaction to think that she had fulfilled her portion of the compact to the very letter, and was therefore fully justified in demanding a similar fidelity to the agreement on his part. She had done as he had desired; she had arrayed herself in her most becoming apparel, and there would consequently be no pretext for another meeting, no excuse on his part for demanding another interview.

Thus do we find this noble lady faithful to the terms which had been imposed upon her, and which she had accepted as the condition of Ramsey's bidding her farewell for ever. We shall presently see how far she was justified in placing any reliance upon the solemnly pledged oath of that man whom she had once loved with all the ardour of a worship and all the frenzy of an infatuation.

She looked at her watch, it wanted five minutes to nine. Satisfying herself that the note which she had written in the afternoon was safe in her bosom, the Countess of Desborough summoned all her courage to her aid, and proceeded along the passage to the parlour where she had appointed to meet Ramsey. She carried in her hands the two wax-candles which belonged to her own bedchamber; and upon entering the room, she carefully closed the shutters and drew the curtains, that the light should not be observed from without. Then she looked to ascertain that the loaded pistol and the pointed dagger were safe where she had deposited them; and scarcely had she satisfied herself on this head, when she heard footsteps stealthily ascending the stairs.

Her breath was suspended as she listened, her bosom

remained upheaved for a few moments, and the colour came and went upon her cheeks in variations as rapid as the play of the moonlight upon the rippling surface of a lake. The dreaded instant was at hand, and she experienced a sensation like a warning that this was a crisis in her destiny. Another moment — and the door opened.

Then the breath came again, and the bosom fell, yes, and the heart too fell within. A dimness overspread her vision, and she staggered a few steps backward, as the ominous figure, muffled in the capacious cloak and with a large hat slouched over the countenance which it completely shaded, crossed the threshold and stood in her presence. But when that figure, like some sinister being of another world, turned and closed the door behind, when, in fact, the belief struck to the soul of the countess that she was now alone with the resuscitated criminal, the thought sent through her entire frame such a thrill of horror that she was instantaneously recalled, or rather startled, to a full sense of her unenviable position.

But the visitor stood there, nor offered to remove his hat; and this circumstance struck the countess as singular. She threw upon him an eagle glance, — a glance which pierced like a lightning flash through the shade in which the slouching brims and the high cloak-collar obscured his features; and then a scream burst from her lips as she saw that her visitor was not Philip Ramsey.

At the same moment the hat was flung off, the cloak thrown aside; and the Prince of Wales stood in the presence of the Countess of Desborough.

"I am betrayed! I am betrayed!" she murmured, all the colour flying from her cheeks, and her limbs tottering back once more. "But what means this imposture — this cheat?" she exclaimed, suddenly nerved with the courage of desperation; and her eyes flashed fire and her countenance grew flushed again.

"Banish all excitement, beautiful lady," said the prince, in a tone of joyous confidence; "for we may perhaps have some few matters to discuss, and I should recommend you to enter upon the argument with coolness and composure."

While the prince was yet speaking, the terrible thought flashed to the brain of the countess that inasmuch as he had come thither as Ramsey's substitute, he was doubtless aware

of everything which had taken place between herself and the resuscitated criminal; and recoiling from the hideous idea that her shame and infamy were thus known to a man who was so thoroughly heartless and so remorselessly cruel, she sank down as if annihilated upon the sofa that happened to be near.

Again did the rich carnation fly from her cheeks; and with a look of despair fixed upon his Royal Highness, she appeared to regard him as the arbiter of her destinies.

"Listen to me, Lady Desborough," said the prince, crossing his arms over his breast as he stood before her drawn up to his full height: "you are at length in my power, and you feel it. Circumstances have ordained that my vengeance and my passion shall be consummated at the same time. I have longed to humble you, and with a single word can I do it; I have longed to possess you, and in a few minutes you will surrender yourself to my arms."

"Never — never!" exclaimed the countess, actuated by a sudden frenzy; and she bounded toward the place where she had concealed the murderous weapons.

But the prince, imagining that she was about to seek the door in order to effect her escape, caught her around the waist; and, as he thus drew her somewhat suddenly and violently back, she pulled out the drawer the handle of which she had just grasped.

The pistol and the dagger were thus revealed to the eyes of the prince, who absolutely hurled the countess from him while he snatched up the weapons. The unhappy lady was thrown forcibly upon the sofa; and, finding herself baffled, defeated, overwhelmed at every point, she covered her face with her hands and burst into a flood of tears. At the same moment the prince snapped the dagger in twain and dashed the contents of a water decanter over the priming of the pistol.

"Now you are utterly and irredeemably in my power," he said, with a tone and look of savage triumph. "I said ere now that I could humble you with a word, and that word shall be spoken without hesitation and without remorse. Yes, proud and haughty lady, I salute thee as the paramour of the man who was hanged — "

A shriek that was half-stifled by a convulsive sob burst from the lips of the wretched Eleanor, as she clasped her

hands together, while the whole elastic symmetry of her elegant form writhed with the spasmodic thrill of horror that shot through it.

"Now, you have forced me thus to proclaim the humiliating fact," continued the prince, "you, who would have murdered me if I had left you the chance," he cried, flinging a rapid look upon the broken poniard and the useless pistol. "But you need not affect the prude toward me, after having revelled in the embraces of a man whose neck bears the mark of the accursed halter. Oh, you may groan in spirit, proud lady; but it delights me thus to humble thee, yes, thee who hast proved so cruel and so disdainful toward myself! But all thy proceedings are well known to me, Lady Desborough, and I have further evidence, if you wish it to be proclaimed, to show that your virtue is not the most stubborn in the world. For the resuscitated criminal must have been speedily forgotten by the frail fair one who some few weeks after that amour was seen gallanting with the pretty and baby-faced Lord Florimel disguised in a female garb."

"On my honour, on my oath, I am innocent in that respect!" cried the countess, springing to her feet and contemplating the heir apparent with mingled terror and anger. "Oh, surely, surely the one fault of my life is a sufficient reproach, — yes, and a stigma too, — without this second accusation that is so utterly unfounded!"

"What matters it, lady, on how many lovers you have bestowed your favours," demanded the prince, ironically, "when a felon can boast of having been the object of thy virgin affections? For he has told me all, yes, everything, thy husband's tremendous secret — "

"The miscreant Ramsey!" muttered Eleanor between her set teeth, while an expression of diabolical hatred swept like a thunder-cloud over her grandly beautiful countenance. Then, in a rapid and fearfully excited tone, she said aloud, "Prince of Wales, listen to me for one moment, and let us thoroughly understand our relative positions. You are acquainted with all the secrets of my life, and you can blast my reputation and my happiness with a single word. I am in your power — I know it — I feel it. But are you the less in mine? And can I breathe no word that will also blast your reputation and your happiness? Remember the scene at Carlton House, on the memorable night of the ball. Re-

member, I say, how Mrs. Fitzherbert suddenly appeared in the room to which I had been inveigled, and how she proclaimed herself your wife. But there is now another Princess of Wales at Carlton House; and the secret that his Royal Highness the heir apparent to the British throne is a perjured bigamist can be as easily thundered forth to the public, as wretched, wretched narrative of my infamy and disgrace. Pause, then, reflect, and beware how you proclaim a war to the death against me, — a war that shall only terminate in the ruin of us both."

The prince had listened attentively, with the cold mockery of a man who cares not for the menaces which are levelled against him; and the Countess of Desborough beheld with an increasing terror the total failure of the course which she was adopting. She read upon his countenance the contempt that he experienced for her words; she saw in his looks the fiendish satisfaction of a certain triumph.

"But the proofs of my marriage with Mrs. Fitzherbert?" he exclaimed; "those proofs, I say, where are they? Destroyed — annihilated! The papers are burned, and no one will credit the mad assertions of interested or revengeful women. You perceive, therefore, Eleanor, that I am not in your power — "

"One word more, then," ejaculated the countess, well-nigh driven to the frenzy of despair; "consummate the crowning infamy with regard to me, force me to surrender to your arms, and I swear by Heaven that I will yet wreak a deadly vengeance upon you and yours! Prince of Wales," added the unhappy lady, the words hissing between her ashy lips, "your sister the Princess Sophia has become a mother, you know it, and, as there is a God above us, I will reveal that tremendous secret if you dare to persist in your cowardly conduct toward me!"

The heir apparent was staggered; for this blow came as cruelly as it was unexpected. The countess perceived the sudden effect which the menace had produced, and her features became animated with a joyous triumph. It seemed as if all the fire of her beauty, which a moment before had paled and grown dim, blazed up resplendently in an instant; and his Royal Highness, on recovering from the shock that he had just experienced, was seized with another and far different feeling. He beheld before him a woman who appeared

suddenly to have changed and dilated into the glory of a goddess; and all at once was he maddened by the effect of that flushing of her splendid countenance, that lighting up of her magnificent dark eyes, and that heaving of her half-naked bosom, — these being the evidences of the joyous triumph which had suddenly thrilled with a warm glow thoughout her entire being.

"Eleanor, Eleanor," he said, his voice trembling with ardent passion, "let us be friends, let us not continue enemies. I love you, yes, I love you, and I implore your pardon for the torture which I have inflicted upon your feelings. I was wrong, I was a coward, I performed an unmanly part; but you will forgive me — you will forgive me. Oh, remember that there was once an occasion when you were even ready to crown my happiness, when the appointment was made, and when your fervid kisses had already given me a foretaste of the Elysian joys which I was to experience in your arms. Why, then, have you since been cruel? If I can still long so ardently to possess you, acquainted as I am with the secret of your first love, can you not efface from your mind the impression which any untoward circumstances with regard to myself may have made upon it? You became the victim of a felon; I took as a mistress the wife of a felon also. On your side, Philip Ramsey exists as the object of aversion and loathing; on mine, the husband of Mrs. Brace stands in a similar light. Now, Eleanor, are we not upon equal terms? Oh, I was wrong, I was wrong to cherish sentiments of vengeance against you, — you, who are so grandly beautiful. Let us be friends, then, adorable creature, let us be friends; for I would rather — oh, ten thousand times rather — receive you, yielding and full of voluptuous warmth, to my arms, than compel you, struggling and battling, to submit to my will. Come, then, Eleanor, dearest Eleanor, and let there be nought save love and tenderness between us."

The Countess of Desborough had sunk back upon the sofa while the prince was thus appealing to her in an impassioned strain. The thought flashed to her mind that if she yielded to his suit, all chances of exposure would be averted; and she felt that it were more prudent to establish peace at any sacrifice than be precipitated into open warfare with the prince. Not that her aversion toward him was by any means

mitigated; on the contrary, she abhorred and loathed hi with a more intense detestation than ever; and neither h handsome person nor his honeyed words were now able.t produce the slightest effect upon the sensuality of her tem perament. But she saw that he was bent upon accomplish ing his purpose; she felt that she was in his power; and sh likewise comprehended too well that any vindictive measure which she might subsequently adopt would only involv her own exposure without changing the incident of tha triumph which he was this night resolute in achieving.

"Oh, I see that you are moved, Eleanor, you are not blinc to the prudence of adopting a conciliatory course!" he exclaimed, his desires now goaded to a positive frenzy. "Never did you appear more magnificently beauteous in my eyes; and instead of henceforth being compelled to regard me as a remorseless, bitter, and uncompromising enemy, you will learn to look upon me as an impassioned adorer and a staunch friend. Come, then, to my arms, thou adorable one, come, and make me happy!"

And placing himself by her side upon the sofa, he took her hand and pressed it fervently to his lips.

The action was unresisted on her part; indeed, she scarcely appeared to notice it, for she was still absorbed in profound reflection, balancing the alternatives between which she had to choose.

Emboldened by his success, the prince panted all the more longingly for a consummation of his burning passion. He beheld the door at the farther end of the room; and it struck him that it opened into a bedchamber. Rising gently but hastily from the sofa, he proceeded to satisfy his curiosity in this respect; and the result of his examination was in accordance with his prescient wishes. Then he carried the wax-candles into that apartment; and, all this being the work of a few moments, he once more took the hand of the countess and pressed it to his lips.

"Oh, must I yield, then, must I yield?" she murmured, in a faint and tremulous tone; and, as if her senses were leaving her, did she abandon herself to the embrace in which her royal lover now folded her.

He pressed his lips to hers, he strained her to his breast; but neither the ardent kisses which he bestowed upon her, nor the closeness of that contact in which he held her,

excited any scintillation of the fires that on a former occasion he had observed, through the windows of her eyes, to burn so furiously in her soul. Drooping, yielding, and powerless as if it were a mere supple and pliant statue that he folded in his arms, she suffered him to drag rather than lead her into the adjacent chamber.

But scarcely was the threshold passed, when she was recalled to herself by a sudden and thrilling sense of inexpressible hatred and disgust for the man who had that night exercised so cowardly and ferocious a tyranny over her Had he pursued his advantage while yet she was seated upon the sofa, he would have triumphed, and Eleanor Desborough would have been added as another gem to the coronet of his conquests. But that inveterate sensuality which had prompted him to make his happiness as complete as possible, by removing her to the adjoining chamber, suddenly struck her as something from which her mind revolted. She saw that he was treating her as the mere object of his lust, without a single particle of refinement or delicacy in the passion that was animating him; and all that minute preparation, even to the conveyance of the candles into the sleeping apartment, inspired her with a sudden feeling of unconquerable aversion and disgust.

Nerved all in a moment to the energy of an outraged woman, the Countess of Desborough tore herself from the arms of the prince; and, stepping back a few paces, she turned upon him her indignant countenance and her flashing eyes, exclaiming, " No, I prefer a war to the death; and the betrayal of your sister's secret shall avenge any outrage which you may think of offering to me! "

" By Heaven! you shall succumb, be the consequences what they may," cried the prince, darting forward and winding his arms around her waist.

A scream burst from her lips; at the same instant the outer door of the parlour was flung open, and Tim Meagles, followed by the Earl of Desborough, appeared to the rescue of the countess.

CHAPTER XLII

HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS AND TIM MEAGLES

At this unexpected occurrence, the prince gave vent to an exclamation of rage, his hold upon Eleanor relaxing at the same moment, so that with a comparatively small effort she burst away from him and flew into the arms of her husband.

"Bear her ladyship away, my lord," said Meagles, hastily; "and leave me to settle matters with this royal debauchee."

"You settle matters with me!" cried the heir apparent, in a tone of mingled indignation and contempt; then, as he endeavoured to push past Tim Meagles, he said with a malignant look, "Beware how you incur my vindictive displeasure a second time!"

"Your displeasure," echoed Meagles, in a scornful tone; "I despise it! Now, my lord —"

But on glancing around he saw that the earl was already crossing the threshold of the parlour, supporting the countess on his arm; and, making way therefore to permit the heir apparent to issue from the bedchamber, Meagles followed him with one of the candles in his hand. The prince was about to hasten away from the scene of his discomfiture; but the Earl of Desborough banged the outer door in his face, and Meagles, springing forward, locked that door and put the key in his pocket.

"What does this mean, sir?" demanded the prince, surveying Meagles with a haughty air, which scarcely concealed the sudden tremor that shot with the pang of an ice shaft transfixing his form. "Ah!" he ejaculated, springing back in dismay, as a pistol which Meagles drew from his breast flashed across his eyes, "would you murder me?"

" Not unless you compel me to wreak summary vengeance upon you," was the calm but resolute reply.

" Put up your weapon, sir," exclaimed the prince, assuming the air and tone of a bully rather than the demeanour and voice of conscious authority.

" I would much rather keep it in my hand," said Meagles, coolly; " and I warn your Royal Highness that it is loaded almost to the very muzzle. Whether I am a good shot, or otherwise, your Royal Highness has often had opportunities of judging both in the field and the shooting-gallery."

" In one word, Mr. Meagles," exclaimed the prince, affecting a half-smile, " what am I to understand by this jesting? Do you wish to win me over by a joke to our ancient friendship? If so, I shall not hesitate to pardon you for the past, and reinstate you in that favour which you always received at my hands so long as you were worthy of it."

" Upon my soul, I never was farther off in all my life from the contemplation of a jest," replied Meagles; " but on the other hand I never was so close to the temptation of blowing a man's brains out as I am at the present moment."

" You dare not use this language to me," exclaimed his Royal Highness, the flush which his recently maddened desires had left upon his countenance having by this time paled down into ghastliness.

" I dare address and treat you precisely as you deserve," responded Meagles; " and if you force me to adopt harsh words, a harsher deed will perhaps follow. Now, look you, Prince of Wales," continued Meagles, throwing himself in a leisurely manner upon the sofa, but keeping the pistol in such a direction that the life of his Royal Highness was held as it were in his grasp, " I have suffered much at your hands, and the day of reckoning is come. You talk of a renewal of your ancient friendship? It is absurd — preposterous! You hate me, and I mistrust you. You will never forgive me for baffling your aims with regard to poor Rose Foster, and for being the means of defeating your purpose here to-night; and I shall never forgive you for sending me out of the country. You would pledge your oath now to renew your former friendship toward me; but when once you were outside these doors, you would enact your past treachery all over again. You perceive, therefore, that I know your character too well to place any reliance upon your honour

as a gentleman, your credit as a man, or your word as a prince. Indeed, I shall not feel easy in my mind, nor disencumber my heart of the load which your perfidy has heaped upon it, until I have expressed my real opinion of you; which is, that you are about as precious a rascal as ever disgraced the human species."

The prince gave a sudden and convulsive start; but the pistol was instantaneously made to take a deliberate aim at his head, and there was now something so darkly resolute and moodily determined in the manner of Meagles, that the coward nature of the heir apparent shrank appalled from the ghastly danger which appeared to menace him.

"What do you require of me, Meagles?" he demanded, in a low and hollow tone. "You are aware that I did not act toward you without deep provocation; for you deprived me of certain important papers —"

"Ah! but when you exercised your power against me," interrupted Tim, sternly, "and had me sent to the Home Office as a preparatory step to being packed off out of the country, you were not aware that I had possession of your documents. It was only when that French rascal of yours went to pillage and plunder my lodgings, that the incident of the missing papers came to light. Your villainous treachery, therefore, preceded the discovery of those documents."

"But since you choose to argue the question," said the prince, endeavouring to pluck up his courage, "let me remind you that your treachery in possessing yourself of those papers had been enacted at the time when I adopted harsh measures toward you."

"Yes, because I had all along been aware of your real character," retorted Meagles. "I had obeyed you as a willing instrument, a servile tool, a ready agent; I had done everything that a man could do to deserve kindness at your hands; and I saw that you meant to throw me overboard and cast me off the instant I should prove no longer useful to you. For that reason did I employ the Amazon to beguile you one day in the bathroom at Carlton House, while I obtained possession of your documents."

"Ah, the Amazon — a veritable demoness!" muttered the prince, in a tone audible only to himself.

"I do not know what you are saying," observed Meagles; "but I can only assure you that Lady Lade entertains

toward you no better feeling than I do, and that any vengeance which I may be prompted to inflict upon you is as much on her account as on my own."

"But do you know, sir, that you are guilty of high treason in menacing the life of the Prince of Wales?" demanded his Royal Highness, suddenly catching at a threat which, with characteristic arrogance, he fondly and foolishly thought would overawe his enemy in a moment.

"I know that there exists such a law as the one to which you allude," was the calm and indeed contemptuous reply; "but even were I a desperate man, without the glimpse of a loophole of escape, I should not hesitate to wreak my vengeance upon you. Much less, then, shall I shrink from acting according to circumstances, now that I may blow your brains out with the full certainty of getting off scot-free."

"What do you mean?" asked the prince, trembling all over; and, in order to seem cool and collected, he took a seat.

"The explanation is easily given and as readily understood," returned Meagles. "His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales employs a resuscitated criminal — Ah! you may well start, I know it all — "

"But who, in the name of God, told you this?" demanded the heir apparent, now trembling like an aspen leaf.

"It is sufficient for our present purpose that I am thus intimately acquainted with all your proceedings," rejoined Meagles. "But, stay," he added, as a sudden thought struck him; "I do not wish you to run away with the notion that the wretched being Ramsey has betrayed you. If I permitted you to entertain that thought your natural vindictiveness would speedily hand him over to the tender mercies of the ordeal which he has once escaped; and I am not barbarous enough to be instrumental in sending the poor devil back to the scaffold, for I suppose that Jack Ketch would do his duty more effectually the next time. I will therefore relieve you from any misapprehension relative to Philip Ramsey; and I will tell you the real truth, which is, that I saw him in St. James's Park, I recognized him as a person of whom I had caught a glimpse on board the *Diana*, I was led by curiosity to watch his movements, and I overheard all that passed during an interview which he had

with the Countess of Desborough in the park. Their conversation revealed to me who he was; and after the countess left him the oral utterance which he unguardedly gave to his own thoughts made me acquainted with the startling fact that he was purchasing his pardon at your hands, as the price of placing the countess in your power."

"The incautious fool! the idiot!" muttered the prince. "His folly has wrought all this mischief."

"Speak out anything you may have to say in comment upon my explanations," cried Meagles; "I do not like those mutterings. Ramsey, you now perceive, has acted foolishly, but not treacherously. When once acquainted with the plot in which you were to figure so conspicuously, I was not the man at all likely to let it pass without an attempt to turn it to my own purposes. I therefore deliberated with the Amazon; and we settled the manner of proceeding. The course indeed was plain and facile enough. I came just now to Stamford Manor, and watched near the garden wall until I saw you enter. I knew your gait, disguised though you were. Then I went around to the front door and demanded an interview with the earl. In a few words I explained to him that a trap had been laid to ensnare his wife, and that the Prince of Wales was the intended ravisher or seducer, as the case might be. I stipulated with the earl that he was to leave me to manage your Royal Highness, as I had an account to settle with you; and you have just seen how faithfully Lord Desborough has fulfilled his portion of the compact. He does not know, and very probably does not care, whether I mean to send the contents of this pistol through your royal head or not."

"Can it be possible that the Earl of Desborough has abandoned me to this insult, if to nothing worse?" exclaimed the prince, almost writhing upon his chair.

"Was it likely that he would remain to thank your Royal Highness for attempting to ravish his wife?" demanded Meagles, with a sneer. "But you do not yet understand how it is that I am in a position to inflict summary vengeance upon you, purely and simply on my own account and that of the Amazon, without incurring the slightest personal danger. Well, I will explain that point as succinctly and as truthfully as I have already informed you how I became aware of the conspiracy wherein yourself and Ramsey have

so pleasantly figured. Let us suppose a case. A husband is drawn to a particular room in his house, by hearing his wife scream; he finds her in the arms, not of a mere seducer, but of a ravisher; and he blows out the brains of the said ravisher upon the spot. You, who have already reminded me of the law of high treason, should be equally well instructed on another point of the English code, which is, that a husband acting in such a manner and under such circumstances is held to be fully justified by the facts, although the ravisher whom he kills on the spot be the heir apparent to the British throne."

"Good God! can the earl have employed you to assassinate me?" exclaimed the prince, endeavouring to rise from his chair as all the fearful truth of Meagles's statement burst upon him with overwhelming force; but, crushed by his fears, he sank back again upon the seat, an icelike tremor shooting through his frame and a cold sweat bursting forth upon his forehead.

"The earl has done nothing of the kind," responded Meagles; "but he has sworn to follow, with a blind obedience, any course which I may choose to dictate. If, then, I kill you upon the spot, the earl will stand boldly forth before the world, and, taking upon himself the responsibility of the deed, will declare that in an instant of ungovernable wrath, and not observing who the individual was, he slew the ravisher of his wife."

"Meagles, my dear Meagles, wherefore should we remain at variance?" cried the prince, in an imploring tone. "You would not do me an injury, much less carry your vindictiveness to such a point as — But no, I cannot think it, I dare not contemplate such a horror — "

"And yet you had no remorse for me, when you exerted your secret influence to procure my expatriation," said Meagles, adopting a stern tone; "nor did you manifest the slightest compunction when you sent and ransacked the dwelling of Lady Lade, your myrmidons performing their mission so brutally that they caused the death of the old man to whom she owed so much. Nor pitying her on that account, did you express sorrow or contrition for what had taken place; but you even menaced her with that cowardly virulence which so eminently characterizes you. Oh, I have already told your Royal Highness that you are

a thorough-paced rascal; and I now tell you, in addition thereto, that you are an accomplished bully."

The heir apparent winced fearfully under this cutting language; but his terrors began to evaporate, for he felt assured that Meagles would not prolong the discourse in this manner if he intended to wreak a bloody vengeance. He knew, in fact, that his former friend was naturally good-hearted and generous, and that he was the last individual in existence to perpetrate a deed of deliberate cruelty and wanton atrocity. At the same time, although the prince thus gathered courage from the reflections which he had now acquired presence of mind sufficient to make, he was not blind to the necessity of using a conciliatory tone and forbearing policy toward the man who still retained the murderous weapon in his grasp, — a weapon the discharge of which might be provoked by defiance or irritation.

" Mr. Meagles," said the prince, " will you inform me at once the nature of the atonement you require at my hands and the reparation which you expect me to make? "

" In the first place," replied Tim, drawing forth a sheet of paper from his pocket, and reaching down a china inkstand from the mantel, " you will have the kindness to write according to my dictation. Nay, do not fear that I am going to push matters to any extraordinary verge; I shall not compromise you farther than I may deem consistent with prudence and propriety."

" But of what nature is the document I am to draw up? " demanded the prince, growing bolder now that he felt his way so far as to ascertain that Meagles himself was ready to effect a compromise.

" Leave that to me to dictate," was the stern reply. " And now, Prince of Wales, let me warn you to beware how you attempt to trifle with me in any respect, — much less refuse to obey me in the present instance."

" Obey you? " echoed the prince, mustering up courage enough for the purpose of a last endeavour to assert his authority and overawe the enemy.

" Yes, obey me, I said," responded Meagles, in a still sterner tone. " For the man who holds the life of his foe at his disposal can dictate his own terms. Such are our relative positions. And now be seated at this table, and prepare to write."

The prince hesitated a moment, — but only a moment; for the sharp click of the pistol as Meagles cocked it fell upon his ear and made his coward heart sink within him. He accordingly placed himself at the table, took up the pen, and began to write to the dictation of Meagles, who now stood close by the chair in which his Royal Highness was seated.

The dictation of the triumphant Tim was to the following effect:

"I, the undersigned, George Prince of Wales, do hereby acknowledge that, without just provocation of any kind, and simply because Mr. Timothy Meagles is acquainted with many private and secret matters which it would be inconvenient to me to have divulged, I did treacherously and falsely cause certain unfounded charges of sedition to be preferred at the Home Office against the said Timothy Meagles, with a view to procure his deportation to a foreign land; that those charges had the desired effect, the result being the expatriation of the said Mr. Meagles on a warrant from the Home Office, and without any regular form of legal and constitutional trial; that, subsequently influenced by threats of exposure at the hands of one of the said Timothy Meagles's most devoted friends, I procured the revocation of the arbitrary sentence pronounced upon him; that in order to testify my deep regret and thorough contrition for the course which I so despotically pursued, and likewise to afford the injured party such satisfaction as shall prevent him from seeking redress by any means which would result in the exposure of my conduct, I hereby bind myself to pay to the said Timothy Meagles the sum of twenty thousand pounds within one month from the date hereof; and lastly, I do declare that this document has been drawn up by my own free will, in my own handwriting, and under no other influence than that of my own spontaneous desire to afford full and complete satisfaction to Mr. Timothy Meagles for the grievous injury which he has sustained at my hands.

"*Dated, the 17th day of May, 1795.*"

The reader must not suppose that his Royal Highness penned the above document without much wincing at some passages and many remonstrances against others; but on each occasion when he stopped to exhibit either hesitation

or anger, or to beseech a mitigation in the pointed severity of the terms in which he was made to speak of his own conduct, the inexorable Meagles presented the pistol to his head and sternly commanded him to proceed. Nothing, therefore, could possibly exceed the humiliation of that haughty, arrogant, and vindictive man; and at the same time, nothing could exceed the calm and resolute determination which Meagles evinced in thus reducing him to obedience.

"Well, sir," exclaimed the discomfited prince, scarcely able to subdue his rage, and utterly unable to conceal his mortification, "I suppose that when I have signed this you will suffer me to depart?"

"One moment," ejaculated Tim; "you must not take me for such a fool as to imagine that I will receive a paper which to-morrow morning you would denounce as a forgery. It must be regularly attested; and where can we find a better witness than the nobleman whom you have outraged and whose vengeance will in some degree he satisfied by the spectacle of your humiliation? Have the kindness to remain here for a few minutes while I proceed in search of the Earl of Desborough."

And without waiting to hear the remonstrance which the prince began to utter against the plan now suggested, Meagles opened the door, quitted the room, locked the door on the outside, and took away the key in his pocket.

The miserable prince groaned aloud. Then, starting from his chair, he began to pace the room in a condition of fearful mental excitement.

While this extraordinary scene had been taking place in the parlour where we have just left his Royal Highness a close prisoner, certain explanations were passing between the Earl and Countess of Desborough.

This nobleman, on rescuing his wife from the power of the royal voluptuary, had immediately conducted her to her own apartment, where she sank upon a sofa and gave way to a flood of tears.

The earl said nothing; not a syllable of either reproach or consolation issued from his lips; for he was as yet unaware how far his wife merited sympathy, or to what extent her conduct had incurred his blame. The explanations which he had received from Meagles were necessarily so brief, hurried, and meagre, that his ideas relative to the incident of the

evening were confined to the mere knowledge that the criminal Ramsey had returned to England, that he had induced the countess to grant him a first interview in St. James's Park and a second at Stamford Manor, and that the Prince of Wales was to become his substitute on the latter occasion.

The fit of weeping into which Eleanor burst on being conducted to her apartment relieved her surcharged bosom and afforded an issue for the fury of all those pent-up feelings that had been agitating her while arguing, reasoning, and eventually battling with the prince. But one of the first effects of that relief was to afford her leisure to contemplate the position in which she now stood with regard to her husband.

"Francis," she said, in a low and tremulous voice, as she rose from the sofa and accosted the earl, "do you believe that I encouraged the visit of the prince to your house? Do you imagine that he came hither by my invitation?"

"I am certain that he did not," replied the nobleman, with a mournful gravity of speech and manner; "for I have learned enough to afford me a glimpse of the whole plot. In a word, Philip Ramsey is in England —"

"Ah, then you know all," ejaculated Eleanor; "and I am spared the pain of much disagreeable explanation. But before another word passes between us, read this," she added, drawing from her bosom the note which she had written in the afternoon; and as she presented it to her husband, the pallor of her countenance changed into the glow of confidence and satisfaction.

The earl opened the billet, which was addressed to himself, and read as follows:

"My dearest Husband: I write these few lines in order to save myself from a fatal misconception on your part, should you by any means obtain a clue to the deplorable circumstances which are now enmeshing me. A person whose name I cannot — dare not — commit to paper has returned to England, and has demanded a last interview with me, as the sole condition upon which he will molest me no more. Overawed by the horrors of past reminiscences, and subdued by the weight of present fears, I have yielded to his desire. But I have prepared weapons to defend myself

against the slightest insult; and I will mercilessly slay that man, if he dare to approach me otherwise than with respect.

"Should he adhere to his solemn promise and content himself with the gratification of that passing whim which has induced him to solicit this interview, — namely, that he may contemplate me for a few moments and for the last time, — it is my intention to keep all this proceeding a secret from my husband. Wherefore afflict him by the revival of the most painful reminiscences? 'Tis I alone who should suffer for the past.

"But should that man drive me to desperation, should this interview lead to some deplorable catastrophe, then whatever may be the circumstances, this note will convince you, my dearest husband, that I am true to the pledge which I made you when receiving your forgiveness for my weakness, my frailty, my crime, in regard to that man.

"Your affectionate wife,

"ELEANOR."

"This goes far — very far to acquit you in one respect," said the Earl of Desborough, when he had perused the extraordinary billet; "but in another — And yet," he exclaimed, suddenly checking himself, "I know not by what right I dare question your actions, wretched being that I am."

"Speak, my God! speak," cried Eleanor, clinging to his arm and gazing up wistfully into his countenance. "What do you mean? How am I open to suspicion? Return to the room whence you have ere now led me away, and upon the floor you will find a broken dagger, on the table the pistol damped with water. Those were the weapons which I had secreted there, and which I would have used against the prince himself — yes, all prince though he be — had he not discovered them in the place where they were concealed."

"Oh, if this were true, Eleanor," cried the earl, "it would be indeed a proof — But you were in the adjacent chamber, and the lights were there," exclaimed the nobleman, once more interrupting himself, as dark suspicions returned to his mind.

"It was in a moment of utter prostration of all mental and bodily powers," said the countess, now profoundly afflicted at the turn which the conversation was taking,

" that the prince hastened with the candles into the adjoining room and then bore me thither in his arms. But did I not shriek for help? My brain is becoming confused, and yet methinks that I sent forth a cry of terror — "

" True, true, 'tis true, Eleanor, my own dear Eleanor! " exclaimed the earl, catching with the enthusiasm of delicious joy at that evidence of his wife's fidelity in the adventure of the evening. " And you were struggling in the arms of the prince, yes, I remember it all now. But I was bewildered, excited, confused — "

" Oh, you can form no idea of the extent to which my feelings have been this day wrung! " interrupted Eleanor, clasping her hands together in anguish at the bare recollection of all she had endured. " But tell me that you have confidence in me, that you forgive me for having kept my sorrows and their cause a secret from you — "

" Forgive you, my poor Eleanor," exclaimed the earl, pressing her fervidly in his arms; " I was wrong to suspect you even for a moment, after the perusal of that letter. 'Tis for you to pardon me, — yes, me, — for I have been the true source of all your afflictions — "

" Hush! not a word relative to the past," murmured Eleanor, placing her hand upon her husband's lips and concealing her blushing, burning countenance upon his breast.

" Oh, but it requires so little to lay bare again the wound in my heart that nothing can ever heal entirely," exclaimed the earl, in a tone of bitter, bitter anguish. " Had I not made you a victim to my insane love, had I not wooed you, young and impassioned as you are, to bind yourself to my side, miserable wretch that I am, you would have become the happy wife of some man who would not have blushed to look you in the face. Then the one tremendous incident of your life would never have occurred, your whole destiny would have flowed in another and happier channel, and the accursed wretch whom the very grave seemed to have yielded up to tempt you would have remained unknown to you save by name."

" My God! let us not revive the past," exclaimed Eleanor, the tears streaming down her cheeks. " Oh, do not reproach yourself thus, do not accuse yourself of evils which you never could have foreseen, do not lift all the blame from

my shoulders, in order to take the burden so generously upon your own!"

But the earl — the unhappy earl — continued to deplore his sad fate in the most piteous terms, until the big tears began to roll down his cheeks also; and then Eleanor redoubled her consolations, and lavished upon him such tender caresses that he felt the genial balm of a holy comfort gradually stealing into his wounded soul.

"And now tell me, my dear Francis," said the countess, "how Mr. Meagles became your companion in this night's adventure, for that gentleman is known to me by sight, and I instantaneously recognized him when you both burst so opportunely into the chamber."

"When you retired from the dinner-table, Eleanor," returned the nobleman, "I repaired to the library; and soon after nine o'clock one of the servants came to inform me that a gentleman wished to see me immediately upon the most pressing business. I ordered him to be shown into my presence: 'twas Mr. Meagles. In a few hurried words he stated that accident had brought to his knowledge a diabolical conspiracy having for its object the surrender of yourself into the arms of the Prince of Wales. You may conceive the mingled rage, excitement, and alarm into which this announcement plunged me; and I demanded further explanations. These were instantaneously given, but necessarily in a rapid and imperfect manner, so as to afford me little more than a partial glimpse into the plot. Nor did he at once inform me where and when the base attempt was to be made; but, previously to becoming explicit upon that head, he imposed a certain condition — "

"And that condition?" said the countess, inquiringly.

"Was to the effect that provided he enabled me to rescue you from the toils and snares laid to entrap you, I should leave the prince to be dealt with according to his will and pleasure, and that I should consent to become a witness to any document which he might think fit to compel his Royal Highness to sign. I swore to fulfil those conditions," added the earl; "indeed, such was the excitement under which I laboured at the moment, and so great was my indignation against the prince, that I should not have hesitated to pledge my soul to Satan, in order to accomplish your deliverance and appease the cravings of my own vengeance."

The countess was on the point of making some remark with respect to the explanation just given by her husband, when a knock at the chamber door was heard. Lord Desborough answered the summons; and a servant informed him that Mr. Meagles requested a few moments' interview with his lordship. The nobleman accordingly hastened to the library where Meagles was anxiously awaiting his presence.

"Now, my lord," said Tim, "you will have the goodness to fulfil your portion of the compact. I have performed mine, and her ladyship was rescued from the power of that villainous prince."

"I am ready to act as you require, Mr. Meagles," returned the nobleman; "and I thank you most sincerely, most heartily, for your conduct on this occasion. Where is the prince?"

"In the suite of apartments that was to have proved the scene of his triumph," responded Meagles. "Let us hasten thither."

Lord Desborough accordingly led the way to the room in which his Royal Highness was held captive, and when the nobleman entered, followed by Tim Meagles, the royal voluptuary cast a rapid but searching look upon the earl's countenance, to ascertain, if possible, whether there were any hope in that quarter. But the nobleman's features wore a stern and implacable look; and the prince, with hastily averted eyes, muttered to himself, "This wretched impotent will back Meagles in his extortion!"

While this galling reflection was traversing the brain of the heir apparent, the earl had caught at a glance the broken dagger and the useless pistol, — those evidences of the truth of that narrative which he had received from the lips of his wife. A smile of satisfaction beamed for a moment upon his countenance; but repressing any display of feelings apart from the business now in hand, he flung a look of haughty defiance upon the prince.

"Does your lordship intend to support this fellow Meagles in his vile endeavour at extortion?" demanded his Royal Highness, assuming a tone and demeanour of lofty arrogance.

"Silence!" cried Meagles, suddenly presenting his pistol at the head of the heir apparent; "or I will shoot you like a dog."

The prince, recoiling in horror and affright, threw upon the earl a glance of deep meaning, as if to ask whether he, an English peer, would countenance such treasonable conduct toward the heir apparent. But in the cold stern look of Lord Desborough he perceived too plainly that he had nothing to hope; and, feeling that he was completely in the power of the remorseless Meagles and the outraged husband, he resumed his seat at the table on which the document lay.

"Read it aloud," said Tim, in an authoritative voice, as he pointed to the paper with one hand and levelled the pistol at the prince with the other.

And the heir apparent, profoundly humiliated, but not possessing courage sufficient to resist the treatment to which he was so deservedly subjected, that coward, arrogant, unprincipled, and base-hearted prince, we say, was compelled to yield a grovelling obedience to the dictates of the man whom he so cordially hated. In a hurried and tremulous tone, and with his cheeks flushing and growing pale by turns, did he read the document which stamped alike his treachery, his cowardice, and his humiliation.

"Now sign it," said Meagles, in a short and abrupt tone of command; "and beware how you venture to indulge in any observations at all injurious to either the Earl of Desborough or myself."

The prince attached his signature to the document, which the nobleman unhesitatingly attested in the usual style; and Meagles secured the paper about his person.

While he was doing this, the Prince of Wales, plucking up a little courage, — to which, by the bye, he was only incited by the goadings of his malignant vindictiveness, — seized the opportunity to whisper in the earl's ear, "I will be terribly avenged for this. To-morrow all London shall know that Lord Desborough is a miserable impotent, and that his wife has been the mistress of the resuscitated felon Ramsey."

The nobleman became pale as a corpse and staggered back as if struck by a death-blow; but, instantaneously recovering himself, he replied in a low hoarse tone, "Do so, and in the evening I will declare in the House of Lords the conditions upon which that same Philip Ramsey procured a pardon through the interest of the Prince of Wales."

"Ah! what is that whispering?" suddenly exclaimed

Meagles, clutching his Royal Highness forcibly by the arm.

"The prince menaces me," was the calm observation made by the earl.

"I thought as much," ejaculated Meagles. "But, by Heaven! we will be terribly avenged upon him, if he dare injure a hair of your lordship's head. And now begone, you Prince of Rascals!" added the indignant Tim, pushing his Royal Highness violently toward the door.

The infuriated prince would have blurted forth some vindictive menace; but his lips were sealed by the terror of having the contents of the pistol sent after him. The vengeance of Meagles was not however quite completed yet; one last humiliation he burned to inflict upon his royal adversary, and yet he wavered for a moment. But only for a moment! — the temptation was too strong, and the provocation he had in various ways received was too great not to overcome all momentary scruples. Accordingly, he placed the pistol upon the mantel, bounded after the prince, and, applying his foot to the nethermost quarter of the royal voluptuary, kicked him down the stairs.

Oh, crowning infamy — supreme humiliation! A yell of mingled pain and rage burst from the lips of his Royal Highness; and his retreat by means of the private door of Stamford Manor was accomplished with an almost incredible celerity.

"Now, Mr. Meagles," said the Earl of Desborough, when Tim returned, laughing heartily, to the parlour, after having performed the foregoing feat, "you must permit me to offer you some testimonial of my gratitude for the service which you have rendered me this night."

"I want nothing, my lord," responded Tim. "You have already done enough for me by attesting this document and thereby confirming its validity beyond all possibility of dispute on the part of the prince."

"But inasmuch as you exhibit such a marvellous aptitude for the somewhat difficult task of coping with that unprincipled voluptuary," resumed the earl, "and as I myself have no inclination to spare him in the slightest degree, I fancy that a certain little acknowledgment which I possess, and which bears his signature, would prove more useful in your hands than in mine. Without further preface, there-

fore, I beg your acceptance of this receipt for twenty thousand pounds, in which the prince is indebted to me; and I hope you will succeed in recovering the amount."

"By Heaven! this is a gift not to be refused," exclaimed Meagles; "and yet it is a reward a thousand times greater than I can either deserve or look for," added Meagles, as he glanced with sparkling eyes and joyous features over the I.O.U. which the prince had given the earl on that memorable night of his sojourn at Desborough House.

"You need not hesitate to accept it, and I require no thanks," said Eleanor's husband. "I should never think of enforcing payment thereof on my own account; but you will not have the same scruples. I bestow it upon you, not only as a proof of gratitude, but likewise as a means of punishing that unprincipled voluptuary."

"On those conditions, my lord, I accept the handsome gift," exclaimed Meagles; "and depend upon it, his Royal Highness shall be speedily brought to book."

Meagles then took leave of the Earl of Desborough, and repaired to the wayside public-house where Wasp had been left in charge of the horses.

END OF VOLUME IV.